

THIS MEANS THIS.

THIS MEANS THAT.

A USER'S GUIDE TO SEMIOTICS

Second Edition

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Walter, Shirley, and Natasha Hall

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INTRODUCTION

This means this. This means that. will guide you through the morass of meanings that our culture creates. Seventy-six sets of basic semiotic concepts will be explored through a variety of objects, images, and texts. Each set will be presented with a question. Readers can then consider their own answer before turning the page to find the author's answer. In this way, the reader is challenged to think about how meanings are made, interpreted, and understood.

Semiotics is mentioned regularly in newspaper articles, in magazines, and on radio and television. But what is semiotics, and why is it important? Semiotics is defined as the theory of signs. The word "semiotics" comes from the Greek word *semeiotikos*, which means an interpreter of signs. Signing is vital to human existence because it underlies all forms of communication.

Signs are amazingly diverse. They include gestures, facial expressions, speech disorders, slogans, graffiti, road signs, commercials, medical symptoms, marketing, music, body language, drawings, paintings, photography, poetry, design, architecture, film, landscape gardening, Morse code, clothes, food, heraldry, rituals, and primitive symbols—and these are just some of the many things that fall within the subject of semiotics.

To see how signs work, consider the following:

Stop means Stop

Apple means Apple

Crown means Crown

Now compare this:

Stop means Danger

Apple means Healthy

Crown means King

Let us suppose that we see a word saying “Stop,” an image of an apple, and an object that happens to be a crown. In order to make sense of the signs “Stop,” “Apple,” and “Crown” we have to ask: what do these signs mean? In doing this, we have to be careful because signs can easily be misunderstood. The word “Stop” might tell us that there is danger ahead, or it may indicate a place from which you can take a mode of transportation, like a bus stop; the image of an apple may suggest that there is something healthy to eat, or it may be a symbol of youth or beauty; and our object, which is a crown, may indicate the presence of a monarch, or it may tell us that there is someone nearby who is about to attend a fancy dress party.

Signs are important because they can mean something other than themselves. Spots on your chest can mean that you are seriously ill. A blip on the radar can mean impending danger for an aircraft. An X on a map can mean that there is buried treasure. Reading messages like these seems simple enough, but a great deal depends on the context in which they are read. Spots on the chest need to be judged in a medical context; a blip on the radar needs to be read within the context of aviation; and an X on a map needs to be judged in the context of cartography. Signs are not isolated; they are dependent for their meaning on the structures that help to organize them, along with the contexts in which they are read and understood. Semiotics, then, is (among other things) about the tools, processes, structures, and contexts that human beings have for creating, interpreting, and understanding meaning in a variety of different ways.

To get a sense of the enormous range of semiotic phenomena that relate to human life, I have constructed two diagrams (see pages 6 and 9). The first diagram helps to locate what is called “anthroposemiotics” (the study of meanings as they relate to human beings) within a wider field of semiotic interest; the second diagram concentrates on anthroposemiotics itself, which, for the most part, is what this book is

about.

We can think of semiotics as applying, in the broadest sense, to life. The reason is simple. All the forms of life that we can identify have meaning for us. So, what exactly is life? In order to understand what life is we should first try to categorize it, before going on to say something about the important distinction between having a life, living a life, and leading a life.

Life can be categorized in various ways. I have chosen to treat it in the broadest sense possible by dividing it into three basic forms: natural life, artificial life, and supernatural life. As we shall see, natural life is discovered life; artificial life is invented life; and supernatural life is imagined life.

Natural life is apparent to us from our immediate environment. It is life as we ordinarily know it. It is such that we can make discoveries about it. Humans, animals, plants, and microorganisms, along with the universe, galaxies, planets, minerals, and rocks, fall into this category. In fact, anything that we can observe and study using the theories and methods of the natural sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics) or the human and social sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology, politics, art, design, linguistics, economics, geography, anthropology, philosophy, communication studies, media studies, and material culture) will count as a form of natural life in the sense that I am using it.

Natural life can be contrasted with artificial life. Artificial life is not discovered in nature. Instead, it is invented by human culture. This kind of life may be wholly or partially non-natural. Artificial life is simulated or synthesized, often with materials that are nonbiological. Due to this nonbiological element, there may be a debate about whether artificial life is truly "real." Such things as replicants, cyborgs, robots, androids, and intelligent computers may appear to imitate human behavior, but we may still have doubts about the extent to which these forms of life can genuinely think, feel, and have consciousness in the same way that humans do.

Supernatural life is different again. Supernatural life is not life as we ordinarily know it. Instead, it is a form of life that transcends ordinary human knowledge and understanding. We come to know about supernatural life either because we imaginatively speculate upon it (as we do when we envision vampires, mermaids, or unicorns) or because we complement certain acts of faith by imagining the qualities that it might have (as we do if we believe in gods or angels). This form of life is strange to us because natural laws or processes cannot explain it. However, because gods, angels, zombies, and mermaids are often represented as having a humanlike form, and unicorns, dragons, and griffins are often very animallike in their appearance, they are apt to seem familiar. (The distinctions I have drawn are not hard and fast, and there is not always a strict division or consistency between what might be counted as a religious, mythical, or fictional form of life; nor is there any method or rule which can tell us which forms of supernatural life, if any, are real as opposed to imaginary.)

Having divided life into these three central forms, we can now discuss the kinds of lives that they might enjoy. To do this fruitfully, we need to make a distinction between things that:

1. Have a life
2. Live a life
3. Lead a life

Things that *have* a life come into existence, persist for a certain amount of time, and then cease to be. The lives of human beings, of animals and plants, of particles, galaxies, and planets, robots and intelligent computers, material objects, and even of angels, vampires, fairies, and unicorns all conform to this pattern of birth, life, and death.

Things that *live* a life form a more restricted class. They may engage in reproduction, grow, and develop, undertake autonomous activity, have a certain degree of complexity, engage in adaptive behavior, and be able to process chemicals so as to gain energy. Most humans and animals do these things. In this sense, we want to say that they are living their lives.

Finally, there are things that have a life, live a life, and also *lead* a life. Leading a life is about making plans and having projects; it is about decision-making and development, fitting means to ends, conducting oneself according to certain moral codes, being part of a system of values, and trying to make sense of the world in complex ways. These are the sorts of elements that make up typical human lives. They are the things that give human life a meaning. In other words, being human is having the potential to lead a life.

Having divided life into its different forms, and having said something about the difference between having, living, and leading a life, we can now move on to how things relate to the semiotics of human beings (i.e., anthroposemiotics). To get a sense of how anthroposemiotics might be understood, consider the diagram opposite:

SIGNS AND SIGNING

Signs are everywhere. But how exactly are they shaped, communicated, and understood?

In the case of human beings, signs are shaped by the sources and resources that are used to make them, formed by the cultural structures into which they are woven, communicated through a series of diverse channels, and understood in terms of the nature of the societies that created them.

There are many possible ways to help us understand how signs work. For purposes of simplicity, let's use the headings that I have identified in our second diagram:

- Sources of Meaning
- Ways of Meaning
- Structures of Meaning
- Contexts of Meaning
- Channels of Meaning

- Types of Meaning

Sources of Meaning (Where the Message Comes From)

Signs come from two basic sources: the first is natural; the second is cultural. Natural signs arise from the way in which nature takes its course. Anything that is considered natural, or to have a natural aspect to it, can be considered under this heading. Our immediate environment of animals, vegetables, and minerals all exhibit features that have natural meanings to us as human beings, as do the further environments of the cosmos. (Here anthroposemiotics links with zoosemiotics and phytosemiotics.) Natural meanings are not invented by human beings; they are discovered by them. For example, the appearance of a rat on which there are infected fleas such as *Xenopsylla cheopsis* means that there is the possibility of catching the bubonic plague; evidence of the fungus *Phytophthora infestans* on potatoes means that they have potato blight; and discovering that a substance has the atomic number 79 means that we are in the presence of gold. In contrast, culturally produced signs depend not on how nature is, but on how we are.

Cultural signs are those that we have invented to communicate with each other in complex ways. For instance, an image of a rat might be a sign of fortune and prosperity (as it is in certain parts of China). A picture of a potato that has blight might be a sign of famine (as it was in the great Irish famine). A gold ring might be a sign of marriage (as it is in the eyes of certain Westerners). In each of these cases, we have to understand the convention that is being used in order to grasp the meaning that is being communicated. All of these signs, then, reflect aspects of the society in which they are pieces of communication.

This is not to say that a sign will always come from a source that is purely natural or purely cultural. Sometimes a sign involves elements that are both. Consider the way in which we categorize the colors of the rainbow. According to Isaac Newton, there are seven colors in the rainbow. The colors that he identified in 1671 were red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Their corresponding approximate

wavelengths are:



Newton's categorization of the colors of the rainbow might seem to be something based simply on how nature is because the wavelengths of these colors seem verifiable by scientific means. However, the color spectrum is in fact continuous, with one color blending into the other; so it is up to us to decide where to draw the dividing lines between the colors that we experience. One way we might do this would be on the basis of those colors that we think can be readily distinguished with the naked eye.

At this point, we should note that it is a somewhat curious feature of the rainbow that indigo and violet are not always as easily discernible as we might think. To see this, look at the following image of a rainbow and then ask yourself how many colors you can actually see.

Fascinatingly, Newton's manuscripts reveal that when he first conducted his experiments into rainbows he found only five colors. However, in the *Optics* of 1704 he added two colors, to make seven in all. So why did Newton change his mind? The reason seems to be that Newton was impressed by the mystical qualities of the number seven, which at the time was the number of the planets thought to exist, as well as the number that the ancients thought symbolized God's perfection. By insisting that the rainbow had seven colors, then, Newton gave the rainbow the mystical quality that he thought it should have. Of course, there is now also a cultural expectation that leads us to say that there are seven colors in a rainbow. But we would do well to remember that this was an idea invented by Newton. Moreover, it is not an idea readily accepted by other cultures. (Notice that anthropologists have discovered that certain cultures, such as the Sioux from South Dakota, have words like *toto* that cover both the "blue" and "green" parts of the spectrum.). Thus, the number of colors that we identify in a rainbow may be influenced by the science of wavelengths (which is apt to make our decisions seem natural), as well as such things as the mystical powers of numerology (in the case of Newton), along with the color concepts that we happen to be using (so that if we expect a distinction

between indigo and violet it is easier to find one).

Ways of Meaning (What Kind of Message it is)

Signs can be literal, analogical, or metaphorical. All of them provide us with ways to make meaning.

Sometimes there is a good reason for signs to be literal. This is the case with instruction booklets for electrical goods. It is no good if an instruction booklet for a piece of electrical equipment contains analogies or metaphors. If we are confused about how a certain piece of electrical equipment is supposed to work, this may lead to a breakdown in its operation or even put us in mortal danger.

Analogies make meaning. However, analogical ways of meaning are rather different from literal ways of meaning. Analogies, whether obvious or surprising, help us to map one set of meanings onto another. They allow us to draw out likenesses between such things as people, situations, objects, images, texts, thoughts, and ideas. Here are two obvious analogies. If I eat a slice of cake and it tastes good, I assume that it is very much like the other slices of the same cake. In view of this, I might recommend it to a friend. In this instance, I assume that part of the thing (the slice) is like the whole thing (the cake). In contrast, I might buy a new car that I think is not worth the money. In this case, I might warn others not to buy it. In this instance, I am drawing an analogy between an individual car (a token thing) and cars of the same model (a type of thing).

Analogies like the ones just described are so obvious to us that we hardly notice we are using them. However, some analogies are more surprising—the connections may be less obvious. In such instances, an analogy may only work in a very specific respect. For instance, a drawing of a person may be a caricature. In this case, certain facial features may be distorted and exaggerated, but the overall likeness may still be maintained. Here is an example of a face likened to a pear:

Metaphors are different from the other ways of meaning because they draw out connections between ideas, concepts, objects, images, texts,

events, and processes that seem quite tenuous on the surface. Metaphors operate not by saying that one thing is *like* another (as is the case with analogies), but by insisting that one thing is another. The metaphors that we use tend to reflect certain features of the society in which they are produced. In the Western world, we live in a society that is largely mechanistic and consumerist in its outlook. So when it comes to discussing all manner of topics we often use mechanistic and consumerist metaphors that reflect this outlook.

Let's take one concrete and one abstract example of a metaphor to see how they operate. When discussing a concrete topic such as disease, we often talk in mechanistic terms. This leads us to speak about the war against AIDS or the fight against cancer. The idea is that there really is a battle being fought against the diseases that we wish to conquer. The same point about the influence of society applies when we speak about more abstract topics such as time. Here, we frequently discuss matters in consumerist terms: we talk about using time, wasting time, saving time, and spending time, as if time were a commodity like money, rather than a process that unfolds.

Signs, then, whether they are literal, analogical, or metaphorical, reflect the outlook that a given society seems to share.

Structures of Meaning (How the Message is Framed)

Signs are given meaning by the way they make use of certain structures. The structure employed is sometimes immediately detectable, in which case we can say that it is part of the surface structure of the piece of communication; if it is not immediately detectable, we can say that it is part of the deep structure of the piece of communication.

We can use storytelling to illustrate the difference between surface structure and deep structure. It appears that all human beings, whether ancient or modern, feel the need to tell stories. That is why in many different kinds of society we find similar folklores, fairy tales, legends, proverbs, sayings, and riddles, whether they end up in the form of anecdotes, gossip, novels, plays, Urban Legends, operas, soap operas, comic strips, "reality" television programs, or news stories. Due to the

ubiquity of stories in every culture around the globe, we might expect them to share certain structural features along with certain common meanings. One way to understand their similarities is to look at these features.

The elements of stories that are obvious to any reader are those that form the surface structure. These are the characteristics of the narrative that are made evident to us as the story unfolds. They include: character (the developing role of the hero, heroine, villain); themes (the power of love, the horror of war, the conquest of fear, the acceptance of death); plot (overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage, and return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth); genre (romance, saga, mystery, adventure, thriller, war, science fiction, and horror); style (formal or informal); dialogue (vehicular or vernacular); motifs (the use of symbols such as swords, magic wands, and aspects of clothing); setting (the wilderness, the village, the city); the position from which the story is told (from the first-person, second-person, third-person perspective, or multiple narrators); and the tense of the piece (past, present, or future). These features are readily identifiable and can often be understood in quite a literal way by the audience.

In contrast, the elements of stories that may not be immediately apparent to the reader are those that form the deep structure. The deep structure is important because by accessing it we can reveal the underlying meaning and importance of what is being told to us. For instance, the deep structure might be there to persuade the reader of the value of (or, in some cases, to question the value of) such things as traditional values, dominant political ideologies, prevailing ethical systems, preferred social attitudes, established cultural norms, current forms of knowledge, and existing institutional practices. For example, it might be argued that, while Jane Austen wishes to defend certain traditional ideas about romantic love in *Pride and Prejudice*, Gustave Flaubert seeks to challenge them in *Madame Bovary*.

To see how structure works, let's look briefly at another story: *Sleeping Beauty*.

In terms of its surface structure, *Sleeping Beauty* might be thought of as a love story. The hero (the prince) falls in love with the heroine (the

princess) and then tackles various obstacles (including the temptations of the wicked fairy) in order to consummate their relationship in marriage. Interpreted in this way, we might think that the story exemplifies the theme of the power of love to overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers.

The story's deeper structure, however, might reveal a series of meanings that are rather different. It might be argued that the story is there to reinforce prevailing systems of ethics (e.g., those advocating sexual fidelity) and certain dominant political ideologies (e.g., those reinforcing stereotypes concerning class and gender).

The underlying structure of the story may be revealed in various ways. One way is through a discursive examination of the text. Such an examination involves looking at aspects such as the formal qualities of the language that is used to tell the story. By paying close attention to the choice of words that the author uses, we may start to see not only things about the author's own—perhaps partially hidden—views, but also the views of the characters that inhabit the story itself.

In the case of *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, we might look at the frequency with which certain words occur in a particular version of the story. In this instance, the text might reveal that the princess is repeatedly described in terms of her beauty, grace, health, goodness, and kindness, that the prince is portrayed as handsome, and that the wicked fairy is viewed as selfish and greedy. In telling a story like this, the author may be trying to reinforce certain traditional ethical values and gender stereotypes simply by repeating certain words in the hope that they resonate in the reader's subconscious.

Another way to find the deeper level of *Sleeping Beauty* is by drawing comparisons with the overall patterns of other fairy tales. By examining fairy tales in general, we may discover that they have the same underlying narrative features. Two of them might be: 1) that the hero or heroine is presented with a seemingly impossible task, and 2) that the villain is punished in the end. Once these general features are discovered, we may see the story of *Sleeping Beauty* as revealing a more general unconscious fear (reflected in other such tales) that evil

could triumph over good.

Contexts of Meaning (Where the Message is Situated)


Signs take their meaning from the contexts in which they are produced and consumed. I have extended part of the Anthroposemiotics table (see page 9) into a separate diagram (see below) in order to show this:

This diagram serves to illustrate the way that the shift of emphasis from production to consumption has changed the nature of the distinctions we often make between others and ourselves. We were once confined by the strictures of class and tradition to conform to certain expectations concerning the social hierarchy, but these strictures have started to fracture under new regimes of consumption, particularly in the Western world. This has led us to replace some of the old divisions of class and tradition with new distinctions based on such things as taste, style, and (more free-floating forms of) status. This has happened because the instruments that make up the forces of consumption (such as design, marketing, and advertising) have created certain relations of consumption (they have enabled new divisions between people concerning taste, style, and status to arise). Notions of taste (see Bourdieu), for example, have enabled us to maintain social distinctions in relation to gender, race, and class by encouraging systems of classification based on aesthetic judgment and education. Ideas about style (see Hebdige) have helped to sustain specific cultural and subcultural groupings by giving distinctive material form to certain kinds of lifestyle choices (e.g., through choices about clothing). Personal decisions concerning work, wealth, leisure, behavior, and language (see Packard) have aided people in upholding multileveled forms of ranking, all of which give us what we call “status.”

The table below sets out, in a simplified fashion, some features of contemporary society and culture that give a context to the signs that we create:

When considering this table, it is important to realize that although there has been a shift away from an emphasis on production toward a stress on consumption in the contemporary world, productivist ways of thinking

and behaving have not ceased; in the West in particular, they have often continued to work alongside developing systems of consumption. For this reason, the meanings that we read into signs need to be sensitive to the various ways in which preexisting systems of production, and new systems of consumption, are operating (particularly in different parts of the world where the productive ethos is still dominant).



The car provides a good example. Considered as a sign, the car has altered its meaning as societies have moved from production toward consumption. Let's look at the productionist view of the car first. With the emphasis on (mass) production, the car was viewed primarily in terms of its function and singularity. This was the case with the traditional Ford Model T. Ford produced a basic car that was affordable, but the production line process meant there was no choice of style. As Henry Ford was supposed to have said about his car: "You can have any color, as long as it's black." Because Ford cars were all of the same type, there was no question of the purchaser making a comment concerning the style, taste, or status of what was being chosen.

This changed with the contemporary emphasis on consumption. Choosing to buy a Ford in a consumerist society is more than just a practical decision. This is because when choosing a Ford nowadays—rather than, say, a Chevrolet, Honda, BMW, or Rolls Royce—the consumer is forced to make certain decisions about style, taste, and status. The choice of your Ford is highly refined given that it is possible to opt for a Ford Granada, Ford Ka, Ford Fiesta, Ford Focus, Ford Mondeo, or a Ford Galaxy. In other words, the consumer has to decide not just to be a Ford "person," but also whether to be a Granada, Ka, Fiesta, Focus, Mondeo, or a Galaxy "person." In short, the emphasis on consumption has given rise to new cultural distinctions and alternative ways of constructing the social ladder.

Channels of Meaning (How the Message is Communicated)

The signs we make are not independent of the channels of communication that we use to send and receive them. Channels of communication are important because they are the delivery systems for signs. Once again, by enlarging part of our second diagram we are able to show the range of channels through which communication can occur.

The diagram below shows that the channels through which we can communicate are very diverse. What is curious is that a change in the channel that is being used will often change how we react to the message that is being sent. For example, a conversation in person (using sound waves) will often feel very different to one that is conducted down a telephone line (using radio waves). Moreover, a person speaking to us on the phone may feel “closer” than a person speaking to us from a television, who might feel more “distant.” What is important to realize about this latter case is that the voice from the television may feel more “distant” than the voice coming through the telephone not because it has a different quality in terms of how it sounds (it may sound the same), but because there is no interaction.

We can observe similar shifts in meaning to those just identified when we compare the medium through which a given message is channeled. This is apparent when we consider how our view of the same tune (e.g., “Air on a G String” by J.S. Bach) may alter according to how it is being communicated. For instance, we could compare:

1. The tune played on a piano.
2. The humming of the tune.
3. A recording of the tune.
4. The tune in one’s head.
5. The tune as written down in musical notation.

In each of these cases, we might say that the tune is the same but the way in which it is communicated is very different.

Types of Meaning (How the Message is Understood)

Signs can be divided into two basic types: those that appeal to our rational side (i.e., the cognitive) and those that appeal to our emotional side (i.e., the noncognitive).

Forms of communication that are abstract are often connected more with our rational sense. Our rational sense makes calculations. Sometimes it is hard to care about calculations, as they don't always engage us. The Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin knew this only too well. His view was this: one death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.

Forms of communication that are concrete are often connected more with our emotional sense; this makes us feel things, often quite deeply. Some politicians, for example, have realized that if you want votes you have to make voters feel things. You can't just appeal to statistics, because people find it hard to engage with them.

In providing information about people who have died, for instance, we might employ an abstract rational method or a concrete emotional method.

A statistic is abstract: the graph below shows a 75 percent increase in the murder rate in London in 2009. According to the graph, 375 people were killed.

A story is concrete: the cute little girl in the image below, whose name is Emily, died. She was one of numerous children murdered by their parents in London last year. Her father starved her to death.

We don't have time to discover the stories of each of the people murdered in London represented in the graph on the previous page. Even if we did, we might not care to hear all of them. It just seems to be true that while a large group of people dying is terrible, it is not something that we relate to very easily. It is better then, if we want to make a point about death, to make it visual, specific, personal, and tangible. That way, we may connect with it without any problem.

In this instance, I have chosen a picture of a child that may engage your emotions. Children are innocent. They don't deserve to die. Children are

also cute. This image is being used, then, to help bring out latent feelings of affection. And, in this case, I have given the little girl a name. But it is not her surname; it is her first name. This makes the story more specific, personal, and tangible. I also told you a story about her. It was short and to the point. It was also tragic because it seemed as though she died for no reason.

In fact, there is a happy ending to this story: this little girl did not die. I invented the story. So there is no story to tell. And, just to let you know, she is not called Emily. (I invented the statistics about deaths in London, too.)

CONCLUSION

Humans understand the meanings of the signs that they create through the diverse ways in which they lead their lives. Getting this right is about understanding some of the things that we have just discussed: sources of meaning, ways of meaning, structures of meaning, contexts of meaning, channels of meaning, and types of meaning. But as we have seen, semiotics is not about simply accepting the meanings that we think are being given to us. Instead, it is about questioning, reframing, and sometimes making shifts in, the perspectives from which certain signs are viewed. Here are some simple examples to consider before we move on to the specific semiotic concepts that are discussed in the next eight chapters.

Take *Toy Story*. *Toy Story* is an animated film about two central characters: Buzz Lightyear and Woody.

Take Arsenal. Arsenal is an English soccer club.

Take a Benetton billboard (see the example above). A Benetton billboard is an ad.

Film and soccer and advertising are the contexts we normally use for the purposes of interpreting and understanding the meanings of these things. But are these the right contexts? Perhaps *Toy Story* exists only to sell plastic replicas of the two leading characters to children. Perhaps

Arsenal exists only to market merchandise to its fans. And perhaps Benetton exists only to campaign for social and political justice.

If any of that is right, then the contexts (respectively) of film or soccer or advertising might be subject to a shift. And if they are shifted, we should alter our readings of them accordingly.

The meanings of signs may be stranger than we think. That is the message of this book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For full references see the Bibliography on pages 190 and 191

Introduction. The distinction between having, living, and leading a life (p. 8) is taken from Wollheim (1984), p. 1. The part of the diagram on page 9 concerning types of meaning and ways of meaning was taken from Honderich (1995), p. 936. The part on channels of meaning is based on Sebok's classification that is reproduced in Eco (1976), p. 175. A fascinating discussion of our attitudes to color can be found in Deutcher (2010). The mystical qualities of the number 7 mentioned on page 11 are to be found in Booker (2004). The examples in the passage on analogies (p. 11) are drawn from Hofstadter (2007), p. 149. The metaphors for AIDS and cancer mentioned on page 12 are described in Sontag (1988). The table on page 15 takes its departure from Hoch (1979). In the diagram on page 16 I have again used Sebok's classification that is reproduced in Eco (1976), p. 175.

Chapter One. This chapter builds on the ideas first advanced by Shannon and Weaver (1948; reprint 1998), Lasswell (1948), and Gerbner (1956). Saussure lists his examples of the key stages in Saussure (2003), pp. 15, 74, and 76. In describing the trajectories of communication, I have drawn from the ideas of Genber (1956), Shannon and Weaver (1949), and Lasswell (1948). **Intention** (pp. 35–36) uses Morris (1962). **Noise** (pp. 41–42) employs Sebok (1985).

Chapter Two. This chapter makes use of some helpful markers set down in Chandler (2002). Anyone who doubts the importance of literal instructions should consult Mijksenaar, and Westendorp (1999). The wrestling example is drawn from Barthes (1993). An excellent discussion of the problems of translation, which I have alluded to here, can be found in Hofstadter (1997).

Chapter Three. The **Introduction** (pp. 69–70) to this chapter employs the seminal work of Levi-Strauss in Levi-Strauss (1969). **Subjectivity and Objectivity** (pp. 77–78) uses some ideas exploited by Nagel (October, 1974). **Sense and Reference** (pp. 83–84) employs a distinction made in Donnellan (1966). **Problem and Solution** (pp. 87–88) makes use of Adams (2001).

Chapter Four. Many of the concepts used in this chapter have received excellent discussion in Arnheim (1974), Arnheim (1988), Kress and Van

Chapter Five. In the **Introduction** (pp. 109–10), estimates of size of vocabulary for different segments of the human population can be found in Aitchison (2002), p. 7. **Words and Images** (pp. 113–14) employs distinctions from Barthes (1977). **Functions** (pp. 115–16) uses Jakobson (1969). **Placing** (pp. 119–20) utilizes an idea expressed in Lidwell, Holden, and Butler (2003). **Voices** (pp. 123–24) was inspired by Goddard (2002). **Intertextuality and Intratextuality** (pp. 125–26) and **Paratext and Paralanguage** (pp. 127–28) are motivated by Jackson (1999) and Adair (1992).

Chapter Six. The **Introduction** (pp. 129–30) uses Butler and Keeney (2001). **Concepts and Conceptions** (pp. 131–32) employs an idea by Putnam (1993) and this has its roots in Frege. His central ideas can be found in Beaney (1997). **Connotation and Denotation** (pp. 133–34) draws on Fiske (1990). **Combinations and Substitutions** (pp. 137–38) and **Tokens and Types** (pp. 139–40) make use of a discussion in Chandler (2002). **Rule-following** (pp. 141–42) is inspired by Wittgenstein (1953). **Conventions** (pp. 143–44) uses the seminal work of Gombrich (1986). **Classifications** (pp. 145–46) was aided by Bowker and Star (1999), and by some comments in de Duve (1996). **Understanding and Misunderstanding** (pp. 147–48) uses some information from Varasdi (1996).

Chapter Seven. **Genres** (pp. 153–54) and **Styles** (pp. 155–56) have been inspired by Van Leeuwen (2005). **Ideologies** (pp. 161–62) draws on Jaworski and Coupland (1999). **Discourses** (pp. 163–64) makes use of Fiske (1990).

Chapter Eight. **Fact and Fiction** (pp. 171–72) draws on Varasdi (1996). **Legends** (pp. 175–76) makes use of Dale (2005) and Harding (2005). **Characters and Personae** (pp. 177–78) employs Marquart (1998) and Lidwell, Holden, and Butler (2003). **Mysteries** (pp. 181–82) makes reference to Barnes (1995). **Turning points** (pp. 185–86) has an initial idea that I heard John Le Carré discuss in an interview at the National Film Theatre.

1

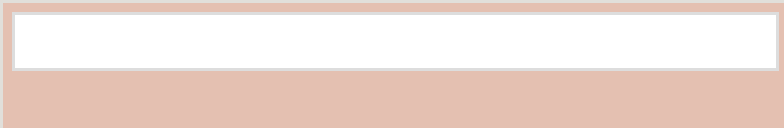
CHAPTER ONE

SIGNS AND SIGNING

There are many views about how we make sense of the world. In one, there is an independently existing world and it is up to us to devise signs and systems of communication to coincide with it. The idea being that it is possible to “remake” aspects of the world by using an imitation or representation of it—what might, broadly speaking, be called a “language.”

The table below presents a rather naive and simplistic view of how this might work. One problem with it is that systems of communication themselves have an influence over—and can alter or augment—the way in which the world itself is viewed. In the field of semiotics, it is argued that the communication systems we devise actually frame, or dictate in some way, how we see the world. In other words, the world is not directly accessed through these various systems of communication; it is mediated through them. The systems themselves are apt to change what we think the world is really like, sometimes quite radically.

This, roughly speaking, was the view of the first semiotician, Ferdinand de Saussure. For him, communication systems —particularly, natural languages—were not there simply to name and classify things as part of “reality.” Instead, they also had a social aspect, reflected in the way in which they were structured. For Saussure, signs had two elements to their structure: the signifier and the signified. Basically two sides of the same coin, the signifier was that part of the communication that carried the message (e.g., a certain pattern produced by a sound, such as the word “house”); the thing signified was that which was communicated by that sound (e.g., the concept *house*). As is obvious, the sound and the concept go together because in order to indicate (say) the presence of a house by using language you have to say (or write) the word “house.”



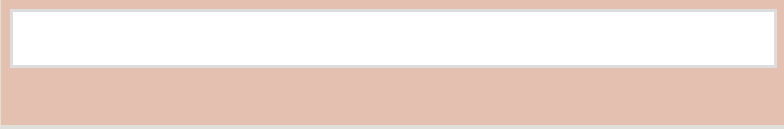
Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified is demonstrated in this chapter, as is the work of another seminal figure, Charles Sanders Pierce. For Pierce signs had three elements: the representamen, the interpretant, and the object. We might say these were:

1. a sign vehicle (which is the medium of communication)
2. a sense or meaning
3. a reference

For example, I might point to a photograph of a planet or say the words “the morning star.” By using the photograph or the phrase (the medium of communication), I make it clear I am talking about a certain planet that appears in the east before sunrise (this is the sense or meaning) and that the planet itself is Venus (this is the reference).

Pierce also made a distinction between the three basic forms signs might take: the icon, the index, and the symbol. These will be explained in the chapter entries, though they will be given a rather Saussurean gloss.

As well as drawing upon Saussure and Pierce, this chapter will explore the sorts of journeys different messages take as they travel from senders to receivers and (perhaps) back again. Analysis of these journeys can help us understand what can and does happen to make communication a success or a failure. Below are examples of some of the key stages:



WHAT DOES THE APPLE IN THIS PICTURE SIGNIFY?

This painting by Lucas Cranach (1472–1553) depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The apple represents the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Satan, who takes the form of a serpent, uses the apple to tempt Eve. Eve picks the apple and gives it to Adam. With this act Adam and Eve fall from grace in the eyes of God.

It is easy to assume that the image of Eve being tempted by the apple accurately reflects the story in the Bible. But in the Bible there is no mention of an apple. Fruit is mentioned, but not apples. So perhaps it was really an orange that tempted Eve. Or a fig.

What seems to matter in the picture by Cranach is that the apple (what we call the “signifier”) is the fruit used to signify temptation (what we call the “signified”). However, while the apple means temptation, some other fruit could have been chosen to represent the same idea. It is only because there is already a well-established connection in our minds between the appearance of an apple and the idea of temptation that this fruit is used in the picture. It is this connection that makes the picture successful in terms of communication.

There are numerous relationships that can exist between signifier and signified. Two important things about the relationship stand out though. One is that we can have the same signifier with different signifieds. The other is that we can have different signifiers with the same signifieds.

In the first three examples below, the same signifier gives rise to different signifieds:

However, in the next three examples, different signifiers (depending on whether the language spoken is English, French, or German) give rise to the same signified:



CAN YOU MAKE SENSE OF THESE DOTS?

These symbols are written in Braille. In order to decode them you have to know that each set of dots represents a letter, which, in turn, makes up a word. In this case the word is “blind.” The word “blind” is the carrier of the meaning. This is the signifier. The meaning of the word, on the other hand, is that which it signifies (e.g., that someone lacks sight).

Signs are often thought to be composed of two inseparable elements: the signifier and the signified. One thing that is intriguing about the relationship between the signifier and the signified is that it can be arbitrary. For example, when I use the word “dog” in order to talk about a certain furry four-legged domestic creature, I employ a signifier that is arbitrary. The sound made by the word “dog,” when uttered, is intrinsically no better than the made-up sounds “sog,” “pog,” or “tog” for talking about this animal. All these words could have been used to communicate the meaning of “four-legged domestic creature that can make the sound woof.” We just happen to use the word “dog,” while in Germany they have chosen *hund* and in France, *chien*.

Many of the signs we use to communicate are arbitrary in the sense that they are not immediately transparent to us. For this reason they have to be learned with the conventions of the language in which they are embedded before they can be used. Once these conventions have been learned, however, the meanings that are conveyed by using them are apt to seem wholly natural. Yet by thinking of meanings as natural we do ourselves a disservice. This is because what is often seen as natural is just the product of various cultural habits and prejudices that have become so engrained that we no longer notice them.

WHAT ARE THESE OBJECTS?

These are Inuit maps. They are made from wood. Rather than being visual, they are tactile. The Inuit hold this kind of map under their mittens and feel the contours with their fingers to discern patterns in the coastline. The advantage of these maps is that they can be used in the dark, they are weatherproof, they will float if you drop them into the water, and they work at any temperature. They will also last longer than printed maps.

Although these Inuit maps are highly abstracted, they still resemble the shape of a coastline. While some maps follow the geography of the place that they represent in a fairly exact way, others do not. When specific information about the environment is represented on a map in an abstract way we tend to say that the map is schematic, whereas when a map resembles the world in a more concrete and exact way we say that it is topographical.

With any icon there is some degree of resemblance between signifier and signified. The degree of resemblance can either be high or it can be low (as we have just seen in the case of maps). There are many other examples. For instance, a portrait may look very like the real person or it may look a little like them— enough, say, for them to be recognizable.

Here are some examples of an iconic relationship between signifier and signified:



WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE WOMAN IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH?

The woman in this photograph by Cindy Sherman looks as if she is dead.

Representational photographs present us with a problem because they often appear to have been caused by real events even when they have been faked. This photograph highlights the very real and disturbing difference between how we might feel about an image of an actual death as opposed to its mere simulation. The photograph also raises the question of how we would be able to tell the difference between the two in certain cases.

When there is a physical or causal relationship between the signifier (i.e., the photograph) and the signified (i.e., what the photograph depicts), the nonarbitrary relationship that exists is said to be indexical.

Other examples of an indexical relationship are shown below.

If only for survival purposes, it is important that we can detect the causal link between a signifier and what is being signified. For instance, we need to know that smoke means (and is often caused by) fire or that a thermometer changing means (and is usually caused by) a rise or fall in temperature. We can see that a failure to detect these things is important when we realize that such a failure can result in mortal danger.

SYMBOL

WHAT DOES THIS SYMBOL MEAN?

The symbol on the last page looks like the Nazi swastika. In fact it is an Indian swastika. In Hinduism and Buddhism the swastika stands for good luck. With the Indian swastika the “L” shape is inverted, unlike its Nazi counterpart.

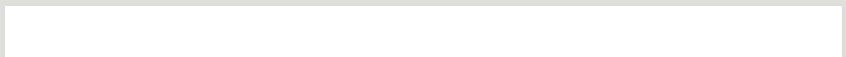
It is often remarked that the Nazi swastika is a powerful and disturbing symbol. The word “symbol” in Greek means “to throw together.” In semiotics one thing can be “thrown together” with another in such a way that a relationship is created whereby the first symbolizes the second. Here are some obvious visual examples:



With these symbols the meaning that is created is related to the nature of the object: balance is important for justice; doves are peaceful creatures; roses are beautiful; and lions are strong. However, there are some symbols where the relationship between the symbol and its meaning is less obvious:



With these examples we need to know what the symbols stand for in advance if we are to understand them. We can't work it out just by looking at them. In semiotics the word “symbol” is used in a special sense to mean literally any sign where there is an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. In other words, it is wider than the more traditional sense of the word “symbol,” as used above. The following, then, are also symbols in semiotics:



SENDER

WHO IS SENDING THIS MESSAGE?

The first five sentences in this speech bubble provide information that helps us to form a picture of the individual who we think is sending the message. The information tells us who the person is, how old they are, where they come from, and what their life is like.

However, the last sentence seems anomalous, and may lead us to ask certain questions. Is this a message from a child who lies about certain things? Is the whole message a lie? Is this a genuine message? Or is it just a fictional piece of dialogue?

A six-year-old black child did not write the sentences in this speech bubble. The author of this book wrote them. But has the “real” sender of the message, namely the author, chosen them for a special reason? Is he just using them to make a point about the difference between the real author (himself) and an authorial persona (the person he might pretend to be)? Or is there some other meaning that lies behind these words?

Consider the following speech bubble:

These sentences provide us with vital information about another putative person. But, once again, we can ask: “Is this person real or is he fictional?”

It is always important to remember that where a message *says* it is from may be very different from where it is *really* from. The former is what we call the “addresser.” This consists of a message that is constructed, and

it may be real or imaginary. On the other hand, the latter is what we call the “sender.” This consists of a message from a real person. Of course, whether we can always tell the difference between these two things may be another question.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS PICTURE?

Even if we *ought* to judge a picture, object, or piece of text in isolation from the intentions of its maker, this is hard to achieve in practice. Consider the painting on the previous page. There are several possibilities as to its creator. An adult, a child, or a machine might have made it. Surely if we can discover who made it, that will influence the way that we judge it, whether or not it ought really to influence us.

In fact, a chimpanzee called Congo made this picture. Once you know that, it is hard to see it in the same way. Over the course of his life Congo completed around 400 drawings and paintings. He was the subject of a study into the drawing and painting abilities of apes by the behavioral psychologist Desmond Morris. Morris argued that the fundamentals of creativity could actually be discerned in the paintings of apes. He claimed that a sense of composition, calligraphic development, and aesthetic sensibilities are apparent (even if only at a minimal level) in the picture-making of apes.

Now imagine that I lied. Suppose a well-known artist created this picture. You might also suppose that the work of this (human) artist sells for vast sums of money. Once we know that a human being rather than an ape produced this image do we start to see it differently? Do we read human intentions and feelings into the picture where there were none before? Do we also begin to see aesthetic qualities in the image that were not present before? And do we also see monetary value in the picture that was not there before?

Whatever you think of this work, and however you would wish to judge the person or thing that made it, it is hard not to be influenced in our judgments by what we take to be the intention behind it.

MESSAGE

WHAT IS THIS MESSAGE REALLY SAYING?

The meaning of the message seems obvious. It appears to be saying that shopping gives us a sense of who and what we are as human beings.

Perhaps there is a deeper message though. To see this we need to understand that “I shop, therefore I am” is derived from “I think, therefore I am,” which was used by the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes.

Descartes was the first modern philosopher. He believed that to build a system of knowledge one must start from first principles. To find secure foundations for his philosophy he employed what he called “the method of doubt,” which consisted of trying to doubt everything that it was possible to doubt. This led Descartes to the conclusion that there was only one thing of which he could be certain, the famous *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”). The idea behind the *cogito* was this:

If I think, it follows that I think.

If I doubt that I think, it also follows that I think. Therefore, either way, it follows that I think.

“I think, therefore, I am” and “I doubt, therefore, I am” were equally true for Descartes, as even doubting is a kind of thinking. This enabled Descartes to conclude that what I am, fundamentally, is a “thinking thing.”

The deeper message behind “I shop, therefore I am,” then, may be this: it is surely ironic that where once we would try to secure our belief

systems on foundations gained by the profound activity of philosophizing, we now rely on the trivial and banal-seeming activity of shopping to tell us who and what we are.

We can scarcely imagine a world without the messages of advertising. But take a moment to think about how we would view the world if all advertising suddenly disappeared.

HOW IS THE MESSAGE OF THE *MONA LISA* TRANSMITTED?

Messages are always transmitted through a medium. The medium carries the message from the sender to the receiver. The medium may be:

Presentational: through the voice, the face (or parts of the face such as the mouth or the eyes), or the body (or parts of the body such as the hands).

Representational: through paintings, books, photographs, drawings, writings, and buildings.

Mechanical: through telephones, the internet, television, radio, and the cinema.

The message of the *Mona Lisa* is transmitted through all three mediums. It uses the presentational medium of facial expression, the representational medium of painting (in its original form), and the mechanical medium of the internet and television (in its digital form).

The enigmatic expression of the *Mona Lisa* is often remarked upon. To see how this expression is transmitted, consider the following drawings:

In both of these drawings the eyes are identical in terms of shape, tone, and position. What makes the eyes in the first picture seem happy, and the eyes in the second picture seem sad, is the mouth. The mouth is the transmitter of emotion; the eyes themselves are expressionless.

So even though we know that the charm of the *Mona Lisa* lies in her gentle smile, the lesson from these highly abstracted images of a face may be that very little is transmitted to us by the eyes. The eyes, it seems, are not the windows of the soul after all. The window of the soul is the mouth.

HOW SHOULD WE COMMUNICATE DANGER TO FUTURE GENERATIONS?

Imagine that you had to tell someone living in 2000 years' time about a danger that exists now. Commercial nuclear reprocessing has ensured that thousands of gallons of dangerous radioactive liquid will still be active in thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of years to come. And if we don't tell future generations where and how we have stored this waste they may be exposed to it without suspecting that it is highly toxic.

Communicating danger to people in the future seems to be simple. But it isn't. This is because over such a long period a message can easily be distorted or altered without this being in any way intended. (This distortion or alteration in the meaning or method of transmission of a message, whether intended or not, is called "noise.") Languages, both written and spoken, always change. The meanings of symbols are often lost in the passage of time. In fact, most messages are bound so closely to a particular period and place that even a short time later they cannot be understood. Therefore, ensuring that a message created now can be decoded by future generations is highly problematic.

How to pass on messages about this nuclear peril is not obvious. Perhaps we can use words, pictures, mathematical symbols, smells, and sounds to help us. Perhaps we can create a culture that will spread the myths necessary to deter any curiosity about the nature of these storage systems if they are chanced upon. The prospects, however, seem bleak. Even when you think that you have a message that is clear and precise in the present, it can still be misinterpreted. And that, as we know, can lead to disaster.

RECEIVER

HOW WELL DO YOU UNDERSTAND HIM?

Did you interpret it as one of the following?

I didn't eat Grandmother's chocolate cake.

(Paul ate Grandmother's chocolate cake.)

I didn't *eat* Grandmother's chocolate cake.

(I sat on Grandmother's chocolate cake.)

I didn't eat *Grandmother's* chocolate cake.

(I ate Susan's chocolate cake.)

I didn't eat Grandmother's *chocolate* cake.

(I ate Grandmother's fruitcake.)

I didn't eat Grandmother's chocolate *cake*.

(I ate Grandmother's chocolate biscuit.)

How we make sense of this message depends on how we interpret it and who we think is receiving it. The message says that it is being sent to a certain granddaughter. However, the granddaughter is actually imaginary. The person who is receiving the message is really a reader of a book on semiotics (namely you!). That is why in semiotics there is a distinction between the "receiver" (the actual person who gets the message) and the "addressee" (the person, whether real or imaginary, who is said to be the target of the message).

Below are some examples of familiar fields of communication with different senders and receivers.

In all these cases a message travels between a sender and a receiver *in* a specific context and *through* a specific object. The aim of the sender is to make sure the message has reached the right receiver without anything going wrong.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS PICTURE?

This photograph was taken on Sunday, November 24, 1963. It shows the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby. Lee Harvey Oswald is said to have murdered President John F. Kennedy on the afternoon of November 22, 1963. However, many conspiracy theories remain surrounding the assassination.

The murder of Lee Harvey Oswald and the assassination of President Kennedy are well-known historical events. But how we feel about these events changes according to what historians (and conspiracy theorists) tell us. For example, you may think that the murder of Oswald is deplorable until you discover that he killed Kennedy. You may think that Oswald was not the person who really killed Kennedy and hence that his murder by Ruby was unjustified. Or else, the shooting may seem shocking when you discover that Ruby *may* have been a mobster, an intelligence agent, and small-time hustler who allowed himself to shoot Oswald simply out of a sense of moral indignation.

When the message in this photograph has been successfully decoded and interpreted we can say that it has reached its destination. The destination is the end point in the journey of the message. One problem in semiotics is that the message that arrives at the destination is not always the same as the one that has been sent. The problem occurs because the message can be altered during its journey. This can happen due to the quality of the message, because of an ambiguity in its expression, or it can come down to failure in its transmission, whether intended or not. In this instance, our ability to decode and interpret the message depends very much on what we know about, and how we judge, the historical events that surrounded the murder of Lee

Harvey Oswald.

HOW DO YOU OPEN THIS DOOR?

Even highly intelligent people sometimes pull a door handle when there is a large sign on it saying “push.” If misusing objects like this has nothing to do with intelligence, how does it happen? The problem occurs because of miscommunication. The door handle looks as if it should be pulled, so people tend to pull it. In this instance, it is as though the message that the handle is communicating has managed to overpower the presence of the sign. Here, the word “push” is supposed to act as a feedback mechanism. It is a message for those users who have not yet received the message to push. But it will often fail because a handle gives us a certain visual and tactile cue that indicates a pulling action. We can solve this problem by putting a flat metal panel on a door (instead of a handle) in the same position. Now there is no way of undertaking a pulling action, so we know that the door must be pushed.

Feedback mechanisms exist so that receivers can be corrected when a message appears to have reached its final destination in the wrong form. The right feedback allows us to adjust our response to the message that is being communicated. Feedback is often useful, then, because it can alter the action that we take as a result of what we think the message really is.

Here is an example of an accident that can occur when an object gives the wrong kind of message to its user. A woman wants to reach a high shelf. She requires a low, flat, solid surface to step on. She reaches for a child’s plastic table that appears to have these qualities. The table breaks and the woman falls off, sustaining a serious injury. The table has what is called an affordance. (The word “affordance” refers to those properties, both actual and potential, that determine the possibilities for

how an object looks as if it should be used, whether or not the person who designed it intended it to be used in that way.) In this instance, the table looks as if it can be stepped upon. That is what the woman does, and hence the accident occurs.

The message that the child's table was sending could have been corrected by using a feedback mechanism. For example, the feedback might have consisted of a label stuck to the top of the table that read: "This table will not hold the weight of a person." A simple sticker like this may have prevented both the accident and any litigation that might have followed it.

It should be noted that feedback can take numerous forms: a seat belt clicks to show that it has been correctly used; a website provides a reminder of the parts of a form that we have forgotten to fill in; a whistle tells us that the kettle has boiled.

2

CHAPTER TWO

WAYS OF MEANING

Sometimes we mean what we say. Suppose I look intensely at a painting. Then I remark, “The colors are very bright.” What I have said may be literally true. Perhaps I have made this comment because the colors really are very bright. But what I say may not always be what I actually mean. This is because when I say, “The colors are very bright,” I might state this in a sarcastic way. Sarcasm changes the meaning of what I have said. The sarcasm in my voice indicates that what I really mean is that the colors are dull. And in saying that the colors are dull, I may be implying that I don’t approve of, or don’t like, paintings like this. If I am being sarcastic, then I am literally saying one thing while meaning another.

Literal meanings are important when we need to communicate something clearly and unambiguously. Instruction manuals, whether they are verbal or visual, are required to be literal; so are warnings and measurements. These things are literal because this helps people in avoiding potential accidents and preventing possible mistakes.

There are degrees of literalness, however. We can see this when words or phrases are translated from one language to another. Consider the French novelist Marcel Proust's famous novel, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. This has received two notable translations in English:

1. *In Search of Lost Time*

2. *Remembrance of Things Past*

The first translation is rather more literal and accurate than the second. In this sense, it might be said that the first translation better reflects the nature of the original French. However, the second translation, which is derived from a phrase in Shakespeare's Sonnet XXX, is less literal, but in some ways more poetic. With these sorts of translations, literal accuracy can sometimes be trumped by other considerations, such as simplicity, clarity, eloquence, elegance, or the requirement to present things in a more contemporary idiom; all of these may alter the original in often subtle, and sometimes profound, ways.

What these translations demonstrate is that meaning can easily shift when we are trying to make a copy or duplication of a work of art, piece of design, musical composition, novel, poem, or section of prose. This is the case whether we are considering a translation, piece of plagiarism, paraphrase, facsimile, adaptation, homage, or tribute. What occurs in all of these cases is that some form of modification occurs to the original, whether we intend it or not. This modification, however slight, may subtly alter the meaning of what is being presented.

As we have seen, to be able to engage in literal communication is very important. Engaging in nonliteral communication, however, is no less important. That is why advertising agencies, poets, humorists, filmmakers, and painters often use it. After all, the truth about the world is frequently more beguiling if we have to do some work to understand it. A nonliteral piece of communication may make us work that bit harder to decipher what is meant.

Just as there are various ways to mean what you literally say, there are also various ways not to mean what you literally say. Strange similes and bizarre metaphors, clever metonyms and genuine ironies, little lies

and genuine impossibilities, unusual depictions and curious representations are all of interest to those who study semiotics because they allow us to communicate meanings in a nonliteral way. These nonliteral forms of meaning are often useful because they enable us to make the familiar seem unfamiliar and the unfamiliar seem familiar.

Roland Barthes is a pivotal figure in semiotics who can make the familiar seem unfamiliar. He does this by taking very ordinary-seeming aspects of mass culture and daily life and unmasking their hidden meanings.

One of his best-known examples concerns wrestling. Wrestling is categorized as a sport. This is the meaning that we ordinarily assign to it. Yet Barthes argues that, in spite of appearances, it is not a sport. At first, this claim appears to be so curious, and indeed wrong, that one wonders why he makes it. Yet he makes such a plausible claim for thinking of wrestling in a quite different way that in the end one is persuaded. Instead of being a sport, Barthes maintains that wrestling is really a moral narrative in a spectacular form. For what we really have in wrestling is a cast of characters who represent the twin polarities of good and evil. In this sense, then, wrestling is more like a Greek drama, a pantomime, or a Punch and Judy show. It is there to communicate how ethical battles are fought, and how, in the end, the triumph of good over evil is secured.

In this chapter, we shall examine numerous devices that can be employed to produce meanings of a nonliteral kind. The key concepts will include simile, metaphor, metonym, synecdoche, irony, lies, impossibility, depiction, and representation. All of these concepts are of great consequence because they can help us to produce new insights into the meanings of objects, images, and texts. This, in turn, may allow us to create more resonant meanings in such disciplines as painting, design, advertising, illustration, filmmaking, fashion, and journalism.

SIMILE

WHICH THREE ITEMS ARE MOST ALIKE?

The answer depends on what interests you. We could pick three that are alike in form, three that are alike in size, or three that are alike in color.

When we liken one thing to another we tend to highlight the features that interest us, and we ignore those that don't interest us. The likening of one thing to another is called a simile. A simile is a stated comparison between two different objects, images, ideas, or likenesses. In everyday life we often use similes without even noticing. They often occur in figures of speech (e.g., busy as a bee, dead as a doornail, flat as a pancake, and crack of dawn). Similes are not confined to verbal communication though. They also occur regularly in visual communication. For example, using an image of a lightbulb above the head of a person to represent the idea that they have just had a thought, or employing an image of a heart to represent love, are well-known visual similes. (They are also clichés.)

Artists and designers are always trying to find new similes. For instance, while a hedgehog is not a brush, it is like a brush in respect of its bristles. Here is how we might think:



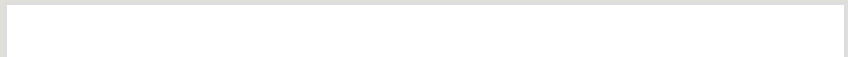
This simile is suggestive because if a hedgehog is like a brush then that might suggest that we could design a brush that looks like a hedgehog. The helpful simile, then, is the one that enables us to see an old object or image in a new light by making a connection with another object or image in respect of a certain property or feature.

HOW IS THIS EQUATION POSSIBLE?

With a metaphor there is an implied comparison between two similar or dissimilar things that share a certain quality. With a simile we say that x is *like* y , while with a metaphor we say that x *is* y .

Objects, images, and texts can all be used to create metaphors. Metaphors are often at their most interesting when they link something familiar with something unfamiliar. By drawing attention to the ways in which a familiar thing, x , can be seen in terms of an unfamiliar thing, y , we help to show that the qualities of the first thing are more like the second thing than we had initially thought. Metaphors, then, work by a process of transference. This process of transference shows that while x doesn't have certain properties literally, it can still have them metaphorically.

When they work, metaphors can also be very persuasive. The schema below shows how the metaphor on the previous page works to persuade us of the qualities of the product.



The aim of Chanel is to find a metaphorical equivalent for that which they wish to signify (namely, a bottle of perfume). The model Carole Bouquet is a suitable candidate because she has the kind of qualities that the perfume is supposed to embody (i.e., beauty and elegance). Notice, however, that the advertisement could have used a different signifier. Had the designer of the ad thought of highlighting a different set of properties then it might have been structured in the following way, by using a thing rather than a person:

HERE IS ONE ANSWER:

METONYM

WHICH NATIONALITY IS REPRESENTED BY THIS OBJECT?

When one thing is closely associated with—or directly related to—another, it can be substituted for it so as to create meaning. A crown might be used to mean a queen, a shadow in a film might indicate the presence of a murderer, and a sign with an image of an explosion might represent the presence of a dangerous chemical. What is curious about these examples is that the thing actually depicted (a crown, a shadow, or an explosion) is used to stand for something that is not depicted (a queen, a murderer, a chemical). Thus, while the thing that is being referred to is missing, its presence is still implied.

When one thing is substituted for another in a piece of communication we call it a metonym. Metonyms use indexical relationships to create meanings. Below are some examples of metonyms.

The intriguing thing about all of these metonyms is that they depend on extensive cultural knowledge. So in order to know which nationality is being represented by the fez on the last page you have to know that they are worn in Turkey. (Though note that a fez may also stand for a particular type of user—a Turkish man of a certain age.)

CAN YOU RECOGNIZE THIS PERSON BY THEIR HAIRCUT?

The person is Elvis Presley.

Sometimes in semiotics what matters is not what you put into a piece of communication, but what you leave out. In order to represent Elvis you may only need to use part of him. In this case his haircut will suffice. Using a part of something to stand for the whole thing, or the whole thing to stand for a part, is called synecdoche. Another example might be this: using an Italian to represent the people of Italy (here the part stands for the whole) or using a map of Italy to represent an Italian person (here the whole stands for a part).

The part/whole relationship is one example of synecdoche. Other examples include that between member and class, species and genus, and an individual and a group. Here is an example of the last kind. Newspapers and television programs often use individual people to stand for a category of persons that they want to portray as a group. So they will report on a story about a particular criminal who is intended to stand for criminals as a group. This works as an act of persuasion because it is easy to get human beings to move from thoughts about a specific case to thoughts of a more general kind that are also negative. In this instance, the activities of a specific criminal will serve to remind us of why we dislike criminals as a group.

Suppose you were given the task of raising money for a charity for the poor. Would it be better to provide abstract statistics concerning the malnourishment of your target group or would you be better off presenting a story about a particular person in that group who was

malnourished (and in that way use them to represent the group that you are trying to help)? Those advertisers who are fond of using synecdoche in their work would probably opt for the latter, because the personal case will tend to awaken more sympathy than a set of rather impersonal statistics.

WHAT IS IRONIC ABOUT THIS VASE?

This work is called *A Vase By Any Other Name*. It was designed by Sean Hall.

A vase for a rose is supposed to sustain the flower, while also protecting people from its thorns. The irony of this work is that it does afford protection from the stem of the rose, but at the same time creates what looks like an equal problem by situating a number of glass thorns on its outside surface. Irony is used in this context to highlight features that will serve to create an effect that is at once amusing and lightweight.

Irony is about opposites. When someone makes an ironic statement they will use the word “love” when they mean “hate,” or the word “true” when they mean “false,” or “happy” when they mean “sad.” In speaking like this they are expressing a belief or feeling that is at odds with what they are saying on the surface. Irony of this kind can occur in everyday speech, but it can also occur in works of literature, music, design, and art.

The problem with using irony is that people don’t always notice it. This is because if something looks serious on the surface then it is all too easy to take it seriously. In order to communicate the fact that you are being ironic, then, you may need to engage in gross understatement or gross overstatement. However, by exaggerating things in this way to make yourself clearer to others your ironic comment may lose some of its power. So to be ironic in the first place might require a culture in which irony is regularly used and understood.

LIES

IS THIS SENTENCE LYING?

It is sometimes hard to tell where the truth ends and lies begin. That may be true of this sentence. Or it may not be.

So what is a lie? A lie is a claim that is literally false. It is, therefore, unlike a factual description, which is true. It is also unlike a prescription, which, given its status as an opinion, is neither true nor false. It is like an ironic comment, at least in terms of its modality (see below), as it is literally false. However, it is quite unlike an ironic comment in that it is not intended to amuse, so much as to mislead.

To see the difference between facts, values, irony, and lies consider someone who says, "That's a good haircut."

Lies are built into the fabric of everyday life. Lies are like truths in being almost never pure and rarely simple. The catalog of human lies—which depend for their existence on liars of various kinds—has been compiled over centuries by (among others) storytellers, biographers, painters, advertisers, politicians, salesmen, lawyers, children, and the list could continue. In fact, a liar is anyone who has an interest in cheating, deceit, selfishness, exaggeration, pretense, and distortion.

But does that make lying bad? Not necessarily. For perhaps semiotics is about creating the lies that make us see the truth.

** N.B. This could be a lie about factual information (because the haircut has not been done skillfully) or a lie about my preferences (because I do not like the haircut).*

IF YOU ADD A SQUARE TO A CIRCLE DO YOU GET A SQUARE CIRCLE?

If something is not literally possible we say that it is impossible. But things can be impossible in different ways. A square circle is not logically possible—though that may not stop us trying to imagine one. The fact that there are no people from the future here now might suggest to us that backward time travel is not scientifically possible—yet filmmakers often try to represent it. It is physically impossible for human beings to fly unaided (unless, perhaps, they attempt it in zero gravity), but that does not prevent speculation—and dreaming—about what it might be like to have the experience.

What is literally possible sets a limit for us. Possibilities (and impossibilities) that go beyond what is literal are rather less limited. In fact, it might be said that contemplating impossibilities is actually liberating, both intellectually and imaginatively. It may be impossible to ignore a notice that says, “Please Ignore This Notice.” It may be impossible to know everything. It may be impossible to understand infinity. It may be impossible to step into the same river twice. It may be impossible to think of nothing. It may be impossible to slow life down—or even stop it. It may be impossible to experience death itself (rather than the process of dying). Yet all of these “impossibilities” open up our thinking in different ways.

That which is not possible has meaning for humans in a way that it cannot for other animals. Other animals are limited because they are actually too literal.

WHAT IS DEPICTED ABOVE THE HEAD OF THE CENTRAL FIGURE?

The answer seems easy. It is a bird. And the bird looks like a dove. However, knowing what is being depicted in a picture is not as simple as it looks. This is because in order to know *what* is being depicted we may need to know *how* it is being depicted.

In this case, the dove is depicted in perspective. Perspective is a convention that has to be read correctly if it is to be understood. It is not something that is simply transparent to the viewer of an image—even if it sometimes seems so. Nor is it a mere recording of what appears on our retinal image. Instead, perspective is a code that has to be properly interpreted if it is to be deciphered. And for the code to be deciphered the viewer needs to realize how objects can present different facets of themselves from different angles, and how shadows and shading change when an object is viewed from these different positions. (For example, looking straight at an object is very different from looking up at it or down at it.)

What is depicted in a picture may also be different from what it represents. In this picture by Piero della Francesca we see a dove. The dove is the object depicted. But the dove represents the Holy Ghost. So when we want to know what is depicted in a picture we need to ask: “What is the picture of?” And when we want to know what is being represented we need to ask: “What does the thing depicted in the picture mean?” While a picture of a dove may mean that there is a dove, it may also mean something else entirely.

WHAT DOES THIS DRAWING REPRESENT?

It looks a bit like a drawing of a hat. Does the drawing only represent a hat, though, or does the hat in turn represent something else? And how can we tell?

Actually, this is a picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. The elephant is inside the boa constrictor so you can't see him. The image is taken from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's children's book *The Little Prince*. The narrator of the book explains the picture with seeming exasperation, because, as he points out, grown-ups always have to have everything explained, whereas children, who often have better insight into such things, do not. (This point, of course, is intended to appeal to the children, who are supposed to be the main readers of the book.)

And that sentiment is right when it comes to representation. Adults often have to have things explained to them. As adults we find that interpreting a drawing made by a small child can be quite difficult, because while the meaning of the drawing is often transparent to the child it is frequently opaque to the adult. The problem is often that the adult needs more information to be provided in order to understand what the child is trying to say. Indeed, when we ask a young child what they have drawn in a picture we often find that something that we did not expect has been presented to us.

What is fascinating about children is that while they are often literal in their approach to perception, they are naive as regards the conventions of representation. This means that they may devise highly creative forms of representation that as adults we would never consider. It may have been this point that Picasso had in mind when he pointed out that it took him his whole life to gain the insight needed to draw like a child.

3

CHAPTER THREE

CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURES

We often use the word “concept” when we want a more exact equivalent for the word “idea.” Here are some examples of concepts: human being, cat, house, table, chair, computer, tree, painting, book, square, soft, red, unicorn, art, design, object, image, text, atom, universe, capitalism, racism, beauty, truth, sameness, and whole. As we can see from this list, concepts come in all shapes and sizes. They can be general or specific, concrete or abstract, natural or technological, artistic or scientific.

Concepts are the basic building blocks in human thinking; as such, they are highly flexible. They can apply to things that are real (e.g., people and cats) or imaginary (e.g., unicorns and fairies). They can help us to make distinctions between things that we observe in the world, such as tables and chairs, oak trees and elm trees, atoms and molecules. They

can also aid us in distinguishing between quite abstract ideas, such as the differences between truth and falsity, appearance and reality, continuity and discontinuity.

We clearly need concepts to help us think about, organize, and understand the world. Yet we frequently fail to realize just how little we know about the subtleties and implications of the concepts that we use.

Consider the following questions:

Is the Harley-Davidson an American design?

Is the Harley-Davidson a good design? What is design?

The first question appears to be answerable on the basis of certain facts. Either it is an American design or it isn't. Or maybe it is partly American. The second question appears to be answerable on the basis of certain judgments that we might make about the Harley-Davidson: namely, whether we regard it as having qualities or features that, perhaps more generally, make a design good. The third question is conceptual; it requires us to say something about design and what it consists of.

This means that we can categorize our questions as follows:

Is the Harley-Davidson an American design? (Factual Question)

Is the Harley-Davidson a good design? (Value Question) What is design? (Conceptual Question)

Notice that in order to answer the first two questions we have to be able to answer the third question. In the first instance, this is because we can hardly judge whether the Harley-Davidson is an American design unless we are sure that it is actually a piece of design and not something else (say, a work of art). In the second instance, this is because we cannot know whether the Harley-Davidson is a good design without being able to say what it is like in terms of design qualities; qualities such as (say) functionality, beauty, simplicity, efficiency, and utility. So conceptual questions are vital to any understanding of the meanings of the questions that we ask and the answers that we give in reply.

While individual concepts such as *design* often need to be carefully articulated for us to understand a particular issue in a precise way, concepts are not always to be understood in isolation; they often form links and relationships with one another. Indeed, pairs of opposing concepts provide a particularly useful structure for study in semiotics as they assist us in interpreting and exposing the underlying features of different human practices. For example, take the way in which we eat. The practice of eating is given a structure by some simple distinctions that are to be found in various cultures. Thus, in talking and thinking about food it is often important to recognize the conceptual difference between that which is raw as opposed to cooked, edible as opposed to inedible, and native as opposed to foreign. It is through these pairs of opposing concepts (i.e., raw/ cooked, edible/inedible, native/foreign) that we come to appreciate the structures that are often imposed on the way we eat.

The same can be said for other human activities. Take religion. Religion is given a structure via a different set of contrasting concepts. This time the concepts include humans and gods, life and death, the sacred and the profane, and good and evil. Once again, these concepts help in clarifying and making sense of not just some religious practices, but perhaps all of them. Also, such concepts help in understanding how religions need opposing forces for them to make sense to their believers.

The same approach can also be taken to clothing. The way that we think about clothing can be understood in terms of garments worn by men and women; by the distinction between formal wear and casual wear; and via the contrast between parts of the body that a given culture thinks should be covered as opposed to uncovered. These pairs of concepts (men/women, formal/casual, covered/uncovered) help to give sense to what might at first appear to be diverse and inexplicable sets of cultural phenomena in the area of fashion.

Discussions of various opposing pairs of concepts that we find in the areas of food, religion, and fashion are legion in the subject of semiotics. However, there are also pairs of more abstract philosophical concepts that apply to all manner of disciplines, subjects, and cultures that are not discussed so often.

These concepts include: truth and falsity, sameness and difference, wholes and parts, subjectivity and objectivity, appearance and reality, continuity and discontinuity, sense and reference, meaningful and meaningless, and problem and solution. In this chapter we will focus on these concepts because, as we shall see, they govern different kinds of human thinking at a fundamental level.

IS THERE A PIPE IN THIS PAINTING?

In his famous picture *The Betrayal of Images* (“*This is not a pipe*”) (1928–29), the Belgian artist René Magritte has written below an image of a pipe “This is not a pipe” in French. But if this is not a pipe, then what is it? One obvious answer is that it is a painting of a pipe. A painting of a pipe is not a pipe, but only a way of representing a pipe. The same could be said of the word “pipe.” The word “pipe” is not a pipe either, but only a word that has the power to stand for the presence (or absence) of a pipe. Magritte’s picture raises questions about the ability of images and language to represent or misrepresent the world itself. Through this picture we come to realize that truth and falsity are stranger concepts than we thought.

Truth and falsity are sufficiently curious that they cannot always be determined. This is particularly so in the world of fiction. Consider the following sentence: “Hamlet had a wart on his nose.” Surely this sentence, like the painting by Magritte, represents the truth or it does not. So is it true or false that Hamlet had a wart on his nose? The problem that presents itself here is that nowhere in Shakespeare’s play does it tell us whether Hamlet did or did not have a wart on his nose. Perhaps he did, or perhaps he didn’t. We just don’t know, and maybe Shakespeare himself did not know either. What this means is that there are some instances (and fiction is the most notable case) where talking of truth and falsity may make no sense.

If painting and other forms of representation are like the world of fiction then it may not be wise to talk about them in terms of truth and falsity. That said, however, it is still true to say that this image looks like a pipe (and it is false to say that it doesn’t look like a pipe). The reason is

simple. If it didn't look like a pipe it would be impossible to teach others—for example, children—that it did look like a pipe.

WHICH SHAPE IS DIFFERENT FROM THE REST?

There is actually no real reason for thinking one shape is different from the rest. It is only a matter of how we choose to perceive these shapes that may make us say that one is different from the others. For instance:

The first shape is the only one with a straight line.

The second shape is the only one that is truly basic.

The third shape is the only one that consists of two separate lines.

The fourth shape is the only one that looks as if it represents a familiar object (i.e., the moon).

Spotting differences is sometimes easy. At other times it is more difficult. Counterfeits, decoys, art forgeries, design replicas, fake currency, photocopies, reproductions, facsimiles, camouflage, instant replays, disguises, impersonators, identical twins, and cloning are all things that raise questions for us about sameness and difference. (They also help to highlight the difference between something real and something that is merely a copy.)

There are two basic sorts of difference. One is a difference in *kind*, while the other is a difference in *degree*. Differences in kind are based on the fundamental sort of thing that we are talking about. For instance, while a person might look the same as a very realistic showroom dummy, these are fundamentally different kinds of thing. On the other hand, differences of degree occur when there are variations between things that may be very similar underneath. For example, the difference between a mountain and a molehill is only one of degree (nevertheless, the difference here is still large). There is also only a difference in

degree between a genuine dollar bill and a forged one (this, though, may involve a very small difference).

The curious thing about sameness is that it is not as absolute as one might think. That is why we often need to ask: "In what respect is x the same as y ? Is it the same in respect of its shape, texture, color, tone, material, use?" After all, it is only when x is the same as y in every respect that we don't really have any differences to speak of.

CAN YOU READ THIS?

The order of the letters doesn't matter because we do not have to read every letter before we can read the whole word. The main thing is that the first and last letter are in the right place. The other letters can be in a total muddle and you can still read the sentence without a problem.

If we tend to see the whole word before we see its parts when we read, then what happens when we look at an image? We might assume that a portrait can only be a true likeness if the various parts of the face are considered carefully in relation to the whole. But some of Picasso's portraits demonstrate that even if you jumble up and distort the details of a face it can remain a good likeness. So maybe the look of the whole face is more important than the exact arrangement of its parts in portraiture.

Underlying these points about parts and wholes is a more general issue, which concerns the philosophical one of when we count something as a part and when we count it as a whole. The iris is *part* of a *whole* eye. An eye is *part* of a *whole* head. A head is *part* of a *whole* person. A person is *part* of a *whole* society. So eyes, heads, and persons are both wholes and parts at the same time. What we see as a whole and what as a part, then, may depend on what we are trying to explain. If we want to understand how the eye works we will miss something if we look only at the iris. Similarly, we will leave something out if we try only to understand the eye in relation to the whole head. What is important is that we engage with the thing we are trying to explain at the right level. In doing this, though, we should not forget that the complexities of the world result from the fact that we can always divide a thing into its component parts or else look for other things that link with it to form a larger whole.

DO YOU SEE THE COLOR RED IN THE SAME WAY AS OTHERS SEE IT?

Some things appear to have a quality that is like nothing else:

The taste of coffee.

The smell of a rose.

The feel of fine-grained sand.

The sound of a bird singing.

The look of the color red.

The qualities of our experience seem to be indefinable in some ways. For example, no matter how much we are told about the science of color (i.e., about wavelength, purity, and intensity, the color-processing parts of the brain, different techniques of stimulation and problems such as color blindness), we cannot say what it is like to have the experience of it. We can only say what the experience is like by having it. In this sense the experience of color appears to be subjective (and personal) rather than objective (and scientific). (As an experiment, ask yourself whether, if you had never had the experience, you could imagine what it would be like to taste coffee, smell a rose, feel sand, hear a bird sing, or see the color red.)

Though there is the subjective side to our experience of these qualities, there is also an objective side that can be tested by various scientific methods. The objective tests for color do not concern what it is like to have the experience so much as the facts concerning what is perceived. These tests are particularly advanced in physiology and psychology.

For example, there are tests that will help us to discover whether color is variable or constant under a variety of viewing conditions, and how the colors that we perceive are dependent on the context in which they are placed (e.g., a color may vary when it is placed next to other colors that are either similar or contrasting). All of these tests reveal something about the physiology and psychology of our perception. However, what they do not reveal—and this is the important point for semiotics—is just what these various colors (and other sensory qualities) actually mean to us.

DOES THIS BATTLE LOOK REAL?

It is often said that the quasi-mathematical technique of linear perspective is the best system for representing visual reality. Developed, some have thought, by Filippo Brunelleschi, the early systems of perspective employed a series of lines that appeared to meet on the horizon at a single vanishing point. The results that were derived by using this system seemed real because they gave the impression of spatial recession and pictorial depth.

The fixed perspectival point of view that is offered to the viewer using this system is illustrated on the previous page in the work of Paolo Uccello in *Battle of San Romano* (c. 1435–60). This picture, by using the contrivance of lances placed on the ground, gives the viewer a series of visual cues that leads the eye from pictorial elements in the foreground of the picture (such as the central figure of Niccolò da Tolentino) to the background of the cultivated landscape with its tiny fighting figures. But does this device make the picture *real*, in the sense that we are presented with pictorial equivalents to the visual cues we find in “normal” perception?

There are various problems with Uccello’s picture as regards its verisimilitude. One problem is that the fixed viewpoint that Uccello gives us does not take account of the fact that in reality the eye is constantly moving in order to see objects in space. Another problem is that we see the world with two eyes, so creating a better representation of reality should actually involve a perspectival system that uses two vanishing points on the horizon so as to give more accurate up-hill and down-dale effects. A final problem is that perspective cannot be a substitute for the measurement of the objects that we see in space.

What Uccello's painting shows is that perspective, while it gives the impression of reality, is one pictorial contrivance that artists may find more or less useful in making images of the world. (Certain formal qualities such as line, tone, texture, and color can, of course, also contribute toward making a picture look realistic.) And even if there are some real-seeming elements to the picture that derive from the way perspective is used, it is still clear that nobody would mistake this for a real battle.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THESE TWO TIMEPIECES?

One answer is that the two timepieces give different representations of continuity and discontinuity. The first thing to note is that the watch face on the left represents time in analog form, whereas the clock on the right represents it in digital form. This creates two different effects. With the watch face we can see time passing as the hour, minute, and second hands move round. Moreover, if we are timing something we may also see how much time has been used up and how much is left. However, with the clock there are only a number of quite sudden changes that happen. With a numerical display such as this we are only able to see exactly what time it is now.

The basic difference between the two forms of representation is that the analog form of time (i.e., the watch face) gives more of a sense of a continuum as the present is represented as having a relationship to the past and the future. With the digital form of time (i.e., the clock) there is an exact representation of the time in the present moment, but as there is a jump when the numbers change time can appear to be composed of units that seem discontinuous.

In general, analog signs create relationships that are graded on a continuum. Examples are things that have a more/less quality, such as: visual images, physical gestures, facial expressions, bodily movements, textures, tastes, and smells. These signs have a richness, complexity, and continuity that cannot easily be expressed in another medium. On the other hand, digital signs have an either/or quality that can seem discontinuous because the categories used are unitized. Examples are things like the following conceptual oppositions: zero or one, off and on, this or that, black and white, light and dark, alive or dead. Notice in all of

this, though, that analog codes that have a flow, such as music, can sometimes be represented in digital form (e.g., on a compact disc).

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE ABOUT THE MAN DRINKING CHAMPAGNE?

In asking about “the man drinking champagne” it is easy to give the impression that we are referring to someone in a straightforward way. But perhaps the person that we think is the man drinking the champagne is, in fact, a woman. In this case there may be no person who is drinking champagne. Alternatively, it might be that the phrase “the man drinking champagne” is inappropriate because the two people in question are just holding their glasses, but not actually drinking champagne from them. Another possibility is that we might have picked out the wrong person in using the phrase “the man drinking champagne” because the man drinking champagne is using a beer glass (while his friend, who has the champagne glass, is actually drinking beer from it). Lastly, we might say that there is no man drinking champagne because both men are drinking a sparkling wine that is not champagne. One lesson here, then, is that just because we want to refer to something or someone, does not always ensure that we will succeed.

Reference is intriguing because you can refer to the same person or object in different ways. When I say “the man drinking champagne” I intend to pick out a certain individual, but if I find that you don’t know which person I mean then I could add, “the man with the red jacket.” These descriptions, though different in sense, could have the same reference. The same point about coreferring terms can be made with the example of “the morning star” and “the evening star.” The phrases “the morning star” and “the evening star” clearly have different senses (or meanings), even though they refer to the same entity, namely Venus. Yet one might suddenly discover that the planet that I am referring to in one way (as “the morning star”) is the very same as the

planet you are referring to in a quite different way (as “the evening star”).

The issues just discussed may make us consider how shifts in meaning or reference can serve to undermine or compromise our ability to communicate clearly and unambiguously with one another about all manner of things that we take for granted in the world.

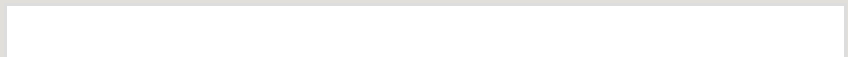
DO THESE TRAFFIC LIGHTS MAKE SENSE?

In the traffic light system that is used in many parts of the world we assign a meaning to each of three colored lights: red, yellow, and green. For drivers using this system the lights have the following meanings:



What these lights mean can seem obvious if you are already familiar with them. Their meanings, though, depend on a number of underlying assumptions. The first is that we each have the ability to distinguish the color concepts *red*, *yellow*, and *green* from one another (this is not an assumption that we might want to make about people that are color blind). The second is that we understand the meaning that each colored light has in the cultures that employ this system (and this is a matter of an established convention that other cultures may not immediately appreciate). The third is that we understand how and why the lights themselves form part of a larger system of road signs (and this, again, depends on specific cultural knowledge that one might have about the country one is driving in).

The meaning of each light is arbitrary if only in the sense that the following combination could still have worked to control traffic had it been agreed upon by the culture in question:



The reason this alternative system could work equally well (and be equally meaningful) is, first, that each color is visually distinct and, secondly, that each color can be assigned a specific meaning within the

traffic light system.

Now think what would happen if traffic lights were structured using the following colors:



This would result in confusion, not because the lights are set out in the wrong way, and not because the lights would be intrinsically meaningless, but because human beings find it hard to see the difference between orange and red/orange and red and red/orange by using the concepts that they have. And this would result in confusion about their meaning, even if it did not render them meaningless.

CAN YOU CROSS THROUGH ALL NINE DOTS USING ONLY FOUR STRAIGHT LINES WITHOUT LIFTING YOUR PEN FROM THE PAPER?

The nine-dot problem is often used to illustrate how our thinking can get stuck. This happens because the tendency is to think within the box shape that the nine dots seem to create. However, when you step outside this constraint a solution suggests itself. One solution is given below:

Once this solution has been seen the tendency is to stop searching for alternatives. Yet there are many others. You could draw through the dots with a pencil that has a tip wider than the box shape itself. You could cut the dots up and put them in a line and then draw through them. You could fold the paper so that you have a small square with all the dots lined up behind one another and push a pencil through them. In other words, each problem may have many solutions.

When we face a difficult problem we often search long and hard for a solution. The history of pictorial representation demonstrates this. Painters thought for a long time that pictures could develop in such a way as to become more true to life. But the problem with any representational medium—whether paint or language— is that it can only stand in different ways (using different signs) for the things that are represented. And because paint and language are not (and can never be) reality they will always fall short of reality. Thus the underlying assumption that we should search for the perfect medium of representation that can mirror reality must be mistaken.

One overall philosophical difficulty we face is that while some problems

have one solution and others have many solutions, some problems have no solutions, and some problems are not even problems. The problem, then, is often in telling what sort of problem we have.

4

CHAPTER FOUR

VISUAL STRUCTURES

Objects, images, and texts are given structure, and hence meaning, through the way in which they are visually composed. This is the case whether we are talking about individual things such as the design of products, furniture, and industrial machinery (objects); the organization of paintings, drawings, photographs, diagrams, doodles, cartoons, posters, graphic images, and emblems (images); or layouts in newspapers, novels, books of poetry, film scripts, and textbooks (texts). It also applies to collections of things (e.g., boxes of coins, scrapbooks full of photographs, and collected works of certain authors) and things that are in sequence (e.g., ornaments in a series, successions of images in films, and runs of pages in particular textbooks).

Visual compositions have two dimensions: space and time. These two dimensions, in turn, have the two elements of placement (where

something is located or is represented as being located) and presence (what something is, or is represented as being, along with how it is rendered).

Placement is about such things as perceived location (near/far), positioning (top/bottom or right/left), situation (center/margin), arrangement (organized/disorganized), proximity (togetherness/apartness), balance (symmetry/asymmetry), perceived viewpoint (above/on the level/ below), and orientation (front/back/side). For instance, orientation is often important in the three-dimensional design of packaging of food products. In such cases, the brand name and an image of the product will tend to be placed on the front of the box, while the ingredients will be placed on the back or the side. The forms of placement tell us what is most important to the producer in terms of communication. With placement in two-dimensional works such as paintings, however, other elements of composition loom large. For example, in painting we may find a visual feature at the top of the picture that tends to idealize it, along with something placed at the bottom that is apt to appear more down-to-earth and realistic. That is why God needs to be placed above humans in a work of art, and humans need to be placed below God. (In a similar way, placing something in the foreground and the middle of a picture can give it importance in a way that placing it in the background or at the margins could not. An instance of this phenomenon is the self-portrait, in which the sitter tends to dominate his or her surroundings.) Certain texts may also be composed in certain ways to draw out key features that we wish to emphasize. Footnotes are an example; they appear at the bottom of a text because they tend to be less important than the writings that are placed above them.

Presence, in contrast, is created by the way in which the different elements in a visual composition draw attention to, or away from, themselves. Presence is created by such things as: number (many/few), size (large/small), color (hue/saturation/brightness), contrast (high/low), detail (fine/coarse), tone (light/dark), shape (regular/ irregular), texture (rough/smooth), movement (static/ dynamic), arrangement (organized/disorganized), transparency (clear/unclear), and demandingness (simple/complex). These elements, depending on the context in which they are used, will help to draw attention to, or away from, different

parts of the composition by providing us with different kinds of emphasis. Thus, objects that are (say) big, red, and round may create more of a presence than a few objects that are small, brown, and square; images that are bright and dynamic may create more of an initial impression than those that are dull and static; and texts that employ clear and simple written forms may have a greater immediate appeal than those that are unclear and complex.

Time, or the temporal aspect of composition, has, in common with the spatial dimension, two factors: placement and presence. Temporal placing is about whether some feature is placed before or after another in a sequence. We find the notions of “before” and “after” in such things as cartoons, chronological diagrams, recipe cards, paintings of changing moments, books on dieting, and well-plotted novels or films. Consider dieting.

In order to show weight loss, books on dieting will place a “before” image of someone who wants to lose weight on the left side of a page along with an “after” image of them having successfully lost weight on the right side of a page (at least, if you are reading a book designed for an audience in the Western world).

Temporal presence, on the other hand, is about whether something is shown as situated in the past, present, or future. For example, history of art lectures can reveal the attitudes of past cultures; books on contemporary design can tell us about the stylistic tendencies of the present; and exhibitions about technological innovations can help us to speculate on the future. Such things as lectures, books, and exhibitions help to give objects, images, and texts the qualities of pastness, presentness, or futureness in the way that they are shown. In addition, the qualities of fastness and slowness, where evident, can count as forms of temporal presence. The pace of time can be indicated by such things as the patina of an object, by blurring in a photograph, or by the crystallization of a transient moment in a painting.

The key concepts to be discussed in this chapter will tend to focus on two-dimensional visual structures and will therefore take the form of questions and answers concerning such things as: viewer and image, ideal and real, given and new, center and margin, foreground and

background, proximity and presence, before and after, past, present, and future, and fast and slow.

WHAT DOES THIS IMAGE REPRESENT?

Assuming that this is a highly simplified picture, there are various possibilities. It could be:

1. A hole in a wall
2. A circle drawn on a wall
3. A circular piece of tube fixed to a wall

Notice that what you actually see does not change in each of these three descriptions. What changes is the way that you interpret what you see. In the first instance, we see through a wall. In the second instance, we look on to a wall. In the third instance, an object comes out from a wall. What is worthy of note are the changes in the way that we see the image but also the fixed position of the viewer. Here the viewer is assumed to be looking across at the image in each case.

But now imagine that you are not looking at a wall, but at a table. Here are three more interpretations. It could be:

4. A hole in a table
5. A circle drawn on a table
6. A circular piece of tube fixed to a table

Again, the content of the image is the same but the notional position of the viewer has changed through the description given. Now the viewer is looking down instead of across.

Now we imagine we are looking at a ceiling. Here are three further

interpretations. It could be:

7. A hole in a ceiling
8. A circle drawn on a ceiling
9. A circular piece of tube fixed to a ceiling

Once more, the content of the image is the same but the notional position of the viewer has changed again. This time the viewer is looking up. (Alternatively, of course, the viewer might be looking down through the hole in the ceiling from above.)

What these nine interpretations demonstrate is that the image and viewer positions can change via new descriptions. It is this constant negotiation and shift between viewer and image, then, that is vital to understanding these sorts of visual structures and our interpretations (and reinterpretations) of them.

WHICH PART OF THIS PICTURE IS IDEALIZED?

Pictures can be divided in different ways. One way to divide them is to place the idealized elements at the top of the picture and the realistic elements at the bottom. Eugène Delacroix's *The 28th July: Liberty Leading the People* (1830) illustrates this point. Liberty, who in this instance is symbolized by the female figure carrying the flag, is placed at the top and center so that attention is drawn to her importance. Below her reside figures that are at once symbolic of the people as a whole, but at the same time somehow more realistic in terms of their depiction. In this way "the people" are shown to be aspiring to the ideal of liberty that is placed literally above them. So, while both Liberty herself and the people below her are idealized, the intention seems to be to make the latter group seem more real, with the ultimate reality of death—which is the consequence of the removal of the ideal of liberty itself—appearing at the very bottom of the image.

The same visual structures are to be found in magazine advertising. In an advert for a certain kind of food we will typically find an idealized image at the top of the page with an indication of the reality of the product being sold at the bottom. For instance, there might be a photograph of a gleaming bunch of succulent looking grapes at the top of the image. Below this we might find that what is being advertised is dried fruit. In such an advert the viewer is reminded of the difference between the ideal (the gleaming fruit) and the corresponding reality (its dried counterpart). But by linking the two it is hoped that the consumer will see how the former might have been condensed into the latter. In other words, the advert, by linking the real with the ideal, indicates the nature of our aspirations to move constantly from what is the case (the real product) to what could be the case (the ideal product).

IS IT BEST TO READ THIS IMAGE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT OR RIGHT TO LEFT?

This image, taken from the Bayeux Tapestry, which chronicles the Norman conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066, should be read from left to right. But how do we know that? One answer is that the horses, although they are frozen in the picture, appear in the main to be travelling in that direction. So maybe there is a clue in the picture itself. More important than this, though, there is the standard convention that reading the image from left to right is simply correct.

It is easy to think that everyone reads from left to right. Of course, in Western cultures this is true. That is why a Western advert for a washing powder will have a picture of a soiled garment placed on the left and an image of a pristine garment placed on the right. By placing the images in this order the reader knows that the washing powder will help dirty clothes to become clean. However, audiences in the Middle East, who read from right to left, will read the advert in the opposite way. It will seem to them as though the washing powder is taking gleaming white clothes and turning them a dirty grey. Thus the meanings we discern when we employ the convention of reading from left to right are actually specific to a given culture and context.

Whether we read from left to right or from right to left, it seems true to say that the information placed on one side of a composition is usually “given” or assumed, while the information on the other side tends to be “new” or unexpected. So in the advert just imagined, the “given” information is that clothes get dirty (this appears on the left in Western cultures). The new information is that the particular washing powder that is being advertised is good at getting clothes clean (this appears on the

right in Western cultures).

WHY IS CHRIST PLACED IN THE CENTER OF THIS SCULPTURE?

The idea of a center is important to many human activities and to much human thinking. The universe has a center. The world has a center. Countries have centers. Cities have centers. People have centers. Even our nervous system has a center. And objects, images, and pieces of text have centers too.

Centers provide a focus. Centers are important and vital. They act as hubs around which other things are positioned, or else they provide a stable point from which other things might circulate. The center can also be the thing that is seen to prevail over that which surrounds it. With centers, though, come margins. Margins are on the outside. Margins provide limits, edges, borders, and boundaries. Margins, in contrast, can be viewed in some ways as overridden by their centers.

We tend to think of something placed in the center of a composition as having importance and higher status. This is in contrast to those things placed on the margins, which tend to have less importance and lower status. In the *Deposition* (or *Florentine Pietà*) by Michelangelo (1550–53), pictured on the previous page, we see the significance of the center and of the relative insignificance of margins. The sculpture includes four figures: Christ, Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, and an incomplete figure. In the sculpture Michelangelo has clearly placed Christ in the center, surrounding him with the other figures who envelop and support him. So although the other figures are physically close to him, they are still on the margins. In this sculpture, then, the concepts of *center* and *margin*, combined with the concepts of *in front* and *behind*, act to contrast the idea of permanence and significance (Christ) with transience and

relative insignificance (Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, and the incomplete figure).

What is interesting about this sculpture is that it presupposes a position for the viewer. (In this instance, we view the sculpture as having a front, back, and sides.) And so, as was the case with the images we discussed earlier, we should not try to see the positioning of three-dimensional objects in isolation from the positioning of the person who sees them.

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE ABOUT THE BACKGROUND OF THIS IMAGE?

Human beings have the ability to perceive things in terms of foreground and background. Take objects that are placed on a table. Here we immediately become aware of the objects themselves (which are seen as being in the foreground) rather than the spaces that surround them on the table (which are seen as being in the background). Take music that is being listened to on headphones. Here the melody of the tune is the usual subject of our focus (which is in the foreground) rather than the tracks that make up the rest of the music (which often seem to be in the background). Consider a printed page. In seeing such a page we will tend first to dwell on the text (which is in the foreground) rather than the spaces that surround the text (which may be considered as a mere background).

M.C. Escher, in his picture *Mosaic II* (1957), demonstrates some of the paradoxes of foreground and background. Curious is his suggestion that what we regard as foreground and as background is in some ways a matter of choice. For in his image our focus can change so that that which is usually seen as the foreground can be viewed as the background, and vice versa. Even though a perceptual switch can occur so that what we see first as foreground can suddenly become regarded as background, we still need to appreciate that this switch does not happen very often (unless it is brought about deliberately, as in Escher's picture). When you see certain things as being in the foreground, other things tend to form a background and in this way become unseen or go unnoticed.

CAN YOU IDENTIFY ONE GROUP OF TWO STARS AND ONE GROUP OF THREE STARS?

Often we group things together because of their proximity. Things that are placed near one another tend to be grouped together. On the other hand, things that are placed apart from one another we tend to think of as separate. The fact of proximity might be one reason we might want to group two black stars and a red star together to make up a group of three, and one black star and a red star together to make up a group of two. Placing things in images in a certain way, or presenting objects in a certain way, then, is important if you want to draw attention to them—or divert attention away from them.

The other obvious way of grouping these stars is by color. This, in contrast, is about the presence or aura that they have. To group them in this way means putting the black stars in a group of three and the red stars in a group of two. Presence can be indicated in different ways by such things as size, color, sharpness, tone and texture. Size is usually indicative of importance and authority (e.g., the Statue of Liberty). Color is often essential for creating naturalism or indicating that naturalism is absent (e.g., over-enhancing color can make an image or object seem dreamlike or fake, whereas removing color can make it seem nostalgic). Sharpness—at least as it applies to images and texts— can make something appear more believable, whereas a lack of it can make something appear inauthentic or vague (e.g., a soft-focus photograph might be used to indicate a hazy memory). Contrast in terms of tone can create drama, but without it the impression may be one of drabness or lack of commitment (e.g., notice how spectacular the stark contrast of black-and-white can be in Film Noir). Texture can be tactile and warm, but it may imply imperfection; its absence can be cold and indicate flawlessness (e.g., an engaged drawing of the texture of human skin

may give a quite different impression to a detached biological diagram of human skin).

WHY DO THE FIGURES ON THE FAR RIGHT OF THE PICTURE APPEAR MORE THAN ONCE?

In this painting, *Tribute Money* (1426–28), Masaccio produces a narrative with three scenes. The composition is curious because the three distinct events are placed next to each other in the picture in such a way that they might not immediately appear to be separate.

The story of the Tribute Money, which is based on an account given in St. Matthew's Gospel, involves Christ, St. Peter, other apostles, and a tax-collector. In this instance, Christ is seen in the center of the picture with the apostles explaining that he has been asked for his taxes to be paid. Christ then invites St. Peter to perform the task, but at the same time tells him where he can find the money. On the left of the picture we see St. Peter catching a fish and removing a gold coin from its mouth. And on the right we see St. Peter giving the tax-collector the money that is owed.

What is odd about this painting is that the viewer has a sense of the order of the scenes even though they do not conform to the pictorial structure that we might expect. This is because there is a conflict between two demands that we have already discussed in this chapter. The first is that the most important figure should normally be placed roughly in the center of the image, and second is that we tend to read visual images from left to right. What this image demonstrates, then, is that even though we might have a standard way of representing “before and after” sequences visually, we can also deviate from it. What we need to ensure, though, is that when we do deviate from standard conventions those who try to read them appreciate how they have changed. Otherwise, the result of a change in convention can be a drift

into incomprehension.

CAN WE IMAGINE THE FUTURE?

Time is important in semiotics because we think of ourselves in relation to its flow and because we are apt to make judgments about it. For example, we can often regard past things as quaint, nostalgic, amusing, charming, or simply archaic, present things as exciting (and sometimes boring), and future things as new, ambitious, avant-garde, or simply frightening. The need to speculate about the past, question the present, and predict the future seems somehow to be built into the chromosomes of human beings.

If we view time as composed of the linear and discrete elements of past, present, and future, then it would seem to follow that we can think of things as being ahead of the times or behind the times. And this is where our thinking about objects, images, and texts starts to become structured and composed by time. For we often talk about a work (say, a product, painting, or book) as being “ahead of the times,” “of its time,” or “behind the times.” But what, more exactly, do we mean when we talk in this way? In what sense can such things really, say, be *ahead* of the times, as opposed to simply *of* the times in which they actually exist? And if it is genuinely possible for a work to be futuristic, how long can it stay out in front? How long will it be before other works catch up?

In this image of the future from Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* of 1926, we find a picture of a strangelooking metropolis. This raises some of the questions we have already asked, but in a visual form. Is this image suggestive in allowing us to imagine what might have happened to make such a futuristic city possible? Or does it only serve to confirm the thought that a 1920s’ view of the future will be nothing more than a 1920s’ view of the future?

CAN WE REPRESENT TIME?

Objects, images, and texts have different forms of temporal flow. This flow can be represented in numerous ways. The flow of an object can be thought about in relation to its life-cycle and in relation to how it is used during that life-cycle (e.g., the walking stick is designed for a life of slowness whereas the motorbike is an emblem of speed and seems intended for a life of haste). The flow of an image may be exemplified by how different movements of time and moments in time can be represented in different media (e.g., a painted image may capture a fleeting smile, or the juxtaposition of multiple images in a film may show the speed of a horse running). The flow of text may be about how it is placed with other texts, how it is spaced, and what sort of graphic and auditory features it has (e.g., slow, long sentences may be evident in a play, whereas quick, short syllables may be evident in a poem).

Slowness can be contemplative, spiritual, sluggish, boring, leisurely, measured, or relaxed. A still-life painting may be motionless and may make the viewer pause for thought. A children's book can repeat itself constantly and may appear slow and boring to an adult. A poem may be meditative, making us dwell on a single moment in time. Fastness, on the other hand, can be exciting, vital, energetic, inspiring, dangerous, and stirring. A fast car chase in a film may be exciting (e.g., the chase in the Steve McQueen film *Bullet*). A painting that has been created with a fast-moving brush can appear vital (e.g., the work of Jackson Pollock). A piece of music that is played at speed can be inspiring (e.g., Count Basie's *Shout and Feel It*).

The question as to whether we can represent time may be misleading; that is, if we think of the question as being about how to depict the

phenomenon of time. This is because there are so many ways that something that takes up time can be represented, none of which may be “true” to the way we experience time itself. (Indeed, we may wonder whether we do experience time at all.) In photographing a flash of lightning (which takes but a small moment of time) we may find that we have translated the experience and quality of fastness into the experience and quality of slowness. What happens by making such a photograph, then, is that something of the temporal aspects of lightning are lost (but also, at the same time, gained).

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CHAPTER FIVE

TEXTUAL STRUCTURES

As a universal medium of communication, human language makes us different from other animals. Just how different can be gleaned from the fact that the average reading vocabulary of a human is around 40,000 words, whereas even the most intelligent ape that has been taught a language-like system of communication can muster only about 400 signs in total.

Natural language, which enables human beings to have highly sophisticated thoughts, has an orderly structure. In the traditional view, one part of the structure is called “syntax,” another is called “semantics,” and a third is called “pragmatics.” The syntax of language tells us when a sentence has been constructed in a fashion that is grammatically correct and when it has been constructed in a way that isn’t. Semantics is about what the sentences we construct, by using various grammatical

rules, mean. Pragmatics concerns the way that meanings are affected by context, both individual and social. Although the grammatical rules for constructing sentences, the meanings that they communicate, and the social and cultural contexts in which they appear are conceptually distinct, in practice they operate together in numerous ways, only some of which are linguistic.

One key interest that semioticians have is how human language is used to create meaning. The basic unit of natural language is, of course, the word. For the most part, however, we interpret words not so much individually but as parts of sentences. By expressing ourselves in sentences we are able to communicate our thoughts to others. In other words, sentences express thoughts. Yet sentences, in turn, can change their meanings according to context. Consider the following:

1. "I am the Queen of Hearts."
2. "I am the Queen of Hearts." These were the exact words that the mouse uttered.
3. "I am the Queen of Hearts." These were the exact words that the mouse uttered. Lewis Carroll was dreaming that a mouse was talking to him.

In the first instance, we might think that a person is speaking. Yet the second sentence tells us that it is not a person, but a mouse. This changes how we interpret the first sentence. However, it is only when we get to the third sentence that we discover that the first words are spoken by a mouse that is appearing in a dream. This final sentence forces us to rethink the meanings of the other two.

The meaning of these three sentences may also change according to how the wider context is constructed. For example, given the reference to Lewis Carroll, we may think that these three sentences are taken from *Alice in Wonderland*. This gives the sentences one meaning. However, if Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is not being referred to here, the meaning will change accordingly.

Meanings can be generated by the different aspects of text:

- The form of the text. This consists of such things as the shapes of the letters (e.g., thin, thick, large, small, shadowed, non-shadowed); the kind of font that is used (e.g., Helvetica, Bodoni); whether that font is rendered plainly, in italics, or in bold; the color of the letters (e.g., saturation and modulation); and the style of layout (e.g., where the words are placed on a page, how they are aligned, whether they are bunched together or spaced out, whether—or how—they overlap, and where the page breaks occur). All of these formal features may give weight and stress to some words rather than others and thereby affect what is being communicated.

- The content of the text. This consists of the meaning of the words along with their reference—if they have one. The content is also produced by such things as punctuation, which can alter what is being said or communicated, and the context in which the words and sentences appear (as we just saw with our Lewis Carroll example).

Meanings, then, can be analyzed through aspects of text alone. However, text can also be judged in relation to how it interacts with various images and objects. (These mixed forms of communication may need to be treated as integrated wholes for the purpose of analysis.) Once again, it is instructive to make a distinction between form and content. Thus, the following elements of images and objects need to be considered:

- The form of the image. This consists of the various basic structures (composition and framing), pictorial devices (perspective and forms of distortion), and formal elements (color, line, and tone) that organize the image.

- The content of the image. This might consist of something concrete that we identify the image as being of: a cat, a car, a chair, a house, a person, a country. Or else it might be related to something more abstract, such as the hearts drawn coming from a comic-book character that signify love or desire.

- The form of the object. This consists of the various structures (composition and orientation); shape orientations (the front and back, top and bottom, along with the right side, left side, and underside of the

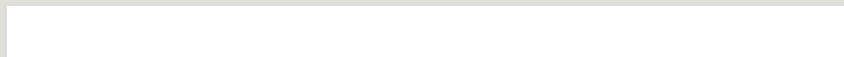
object); the formal elements (color, texture, and material); and the kind of mimicry that the object might take on (e.g., a sofa in the shape of lips). These things are part of the physical makeup of the object and affect our experiences of it accordingly.

- The content of the object. This consists of what the object is: a sculpture, a product, a building, or a piece of clothing; and also what an object might be taken to represent: a sculpture might represent wealth, a product might represent efficiency, a building might represent power, and a piece of clothing (such as a uniform) might represent authority.

This chapter, then, will focus on the ways in which language can be used in very different ways to communicate with others. In particular, we will be concerned with the roles of the following: readers and texts, words and images, functions, forms, placing, prominence, voices, intertextuality and intratextuality, and paratext and paralanguage.

WHAT IS CURIOUS ABOUT THIS POSTCARD?

There are many ways to write a text. There are also many ways to read one. When readers read a text they often make very different assumptions about it. Some of the standard assumptions that are made in reading texts are listed below under the heading of “structuralism.” This structuralist list reminds us that we often analyze the meanings of a text in terms that will give it a unity and overall sense. Now compare these assumptions with those of the post-structuralist (which are also listed below). In contrast, the post-structuralist embraces the idea that a text may not be coherent and may not make any sense overall.



Notice that both structuralist and post-structuralist concepts can be used for the interpretation of images and objects just as much as for texts. For instance, instead of attending to the foreground of an image to find its meanings (which might happen if we are structuralists), we may look more at its background to find its meanings (which might happen if we are post-structuralists). Rather than examine the qualities of an object that make it reliable (which we might do if we are structuralists), we may shift this emphasis and try to examine the qualities that make it unreliable (which we might do if we are post-structuralists).

In the light of the structuralist and post-structuralist concepts listed above, there are at least two ways to read and understand the postcard on the previous page. We could see it as a genuine postcard. This would mean trying to make complete sense of it. Or else, we might see it as a playful form of nonsense, where there is no stable meaning to

which the reader might gain access. In fact, the postcard, which purports to be from Jacques (Derrida) to Roland (Barthes) is intended to be playful in the way it refers to the work of those two authors.

WHICH TEXT IS TELLING THE TRUTH?

To understand some of the numerous interactions that can occur between words and images one might first consider books that have no text. In books for small children that have pictures but no writing parents are forced to make up large parts of the story. This gives a great deal of control to the reader. In this instance, the reader becomes a key locus for the reading of the book. Now, in contrast, consider a text without pictures or illustrations of any kind, such as a novel. In this case, as there is no visual guidance, we have to rely on textual descriptions in order to know what the characters or places in the novel look like.

Images on their own are often so open to interpretation that they fail to provide a stable meaning for the reader to grasp. This may be why we might need to supplement them with words. Words help to reduce the number of interpretations available. Words aid us in anchoring images. (Just how important it is to anchor an image properly can be seen from the picture on the previous page. For it obviously matters greatly whether a glass turns out to contain poison rather than holy water.)

The problem of open interpretation occurs with texts too. And this is where illustration comes in. For example, Sir John Tenniel's illustrations for Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* help to elaborate on, and ground, what is to be found in the text in such a powerful way that people think that Alice really is blond when, in fact, Carroll does not actually specify the color of her hair in the book.

Pieces of text, then, can simplify, complicate, elaborate, amplify, confirm, contradict, deny, restate, or help to define different sorts of meanings when they interact with images and objects. This can occur in cartoon strips, in photographs with captions, in maps with place names,

in advertisements with overlapping text, in ready-to-assemble furniture with instructions, or in the case of sculptures that have written provenances.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?

The meanings of words or sentences depend on the function they play in a language. Here are a number of different ways in which the words “What is’t thou say’st?” and “Do you know what I mean?” might function.

Emotive function. As producers of communication we often reveal things about our emotions (e.g., hopes, fears, and feelings), our attitudes (e.g., beliefs, desires, and thoughts), and our age, status, gender, race, or class. By saying, “Do you know what I mean?” in an anxious way someone may indicate that they are nervous about their ability to communicate clearly. When language reveals some personal characteristic in this way it has an emotive function.

Conative function. Communication will always have an effect on the people or persons receiving it. In this instance, someone who says, “Do you know what I mean?” all the time may simply bring about a feeling of irritation in the listener.

Referential function. When we utter the words “What is’t thou say’st?,” the words themselves may not matter. What may matter instead is how the words are used to create a particular form of reference. In this instance, they may refer to the language of Shakespeare, which is where they come from.

Poetic function. The poetic function is not so much about poetry as about the creativity or aesthetics of language use. So one difference between “What are you saying?” and “What is’t thou say’st?” is that the latter form of expression seems to have an aesthetic quality that the former form of expression does not.

Phatic function. In using the phrase “Do you know what I mean?,” we could be saying “Are you listening to me?” In this instance, the content of the communication is redundant because the purpose is simply to keep the channels of communication open. When you want to maintain or establish communication with someone else, language can be used in a phatic mode to get attention.

Metalingual function. Sometimes we need to make sure communication is working properly. For example, if you are giving important instructions you may need to ask, “Do you know what I mean?” afterward. In saying this, the content of what you say matters because you are checking to see whether what has been said has been fully understood. In this case, the question has what we call a metalingual function.

DO YOU NOTICE ANYTHING ODD ABOUT THIS ADVERTISEMENT?

Different relationships can be constructed between writers and readers—and speakers and listeners—by using different linguistic forms. Some of the many forms that speech and writing can take are listed below:

- Formal Writing: academic essays, legal forms, menus, instructions, medical reports, textbooks, memoranda, manifestoes
- Informal Writing: personal letters, e-mails, postcards
- Formal Speech: political speeches, scripted performances, academic lectures
- Informal Speech: casual conversations, improvised performances, practical seminars

Although these forms of speech and writing are often distinct, they sometimes converge. Converging forms are often employed by advertisers to create different kinds of relationships with consumers. Sometimes an advertisement will take the form of a letter. If such a letter uses a personal form, then this may help create a false feeling of intimacy between the advertiser and the person reading it. This false feeling of intimacy may be effective in disarming the reader. And this in turn may make the reader susceptible to the message that the advertiser is trying to convey.

In the text on the previous page I have used a number of conflicting formats. We are told at the top that it is an advertisement, but it also appears to be a letter in certain respects. It also has certain

characteristics of a manifesto. At the same time the words “Dear Reader” and “The Author” appear on this notional page, which makes it look as though there is a recognition of the fact that the text in the box is being produced in the context of something else (for example, a book on semiotics). By combining various familiar written forms that usually have a definite structure, meanings may start to become opaque. However, by challenging existing linguistic structures there are still some advantages. One is that new meanings may evolve.

It may be of interest to note that the author is producing a limited number of prints from the piece on the previous page that will be sold independently as artworks.

WHICH PERSON DO YOU LIKE BETTER?

Even though the descriptions are the same, the judgments we make about these people may depend on the order of the words used. Our attitudes in such cases result from what are called “serial position effects.” If you preferred George Eliot to Mary Ann Evans then that may be because the qualities listed at the start are easier to recall—because they are held for longer in our working memory—and hence they tend to have more impact on our thinking. This is sometimes referred to as the “primacy effect.” (It could be that certain clichés and stereotypes about women—namely, that they are likely to be more jealous and critical than men—could also influence us in a negative fashion in this instance.)

Our willingness to play with the placing of words and letters to create new and novel meanings is evident from many games and pastimes, from the crossword to the anagram or the palindrome. One way to generate new meanings is to splice two words together. For example, if we choose to splice the word “internet” with the word “intellectual” then we generate the new portmanteau word “internetual.” Having done that, we might seek a meaning for this word. In this case, the word “internetual” might refer to somebody whose, perhaps false, intelligence is gleaned exclusively from the internet.

The placing of words in a new or novel order may sometimes have the effect of shocking or surprising us. The method of cut-and-paste poetry is an example. This way of making poems was popular with the group of artists known as the Dadaists. One of them, Tristan Tzara, suggested that one method of making a poem was to find a newspaper and, having cut it up, to shuffle the pieces in a bag before drawing them out at random and making a note of the order in which they had been

drawn, along with their content.

READ THE FOLLOWING LIST OF WORDS ONCE AND THEN TURN THE PAGE:

Try to remember as many of the words you have just read as possible. Which words did you remember? Which words seemed most prominent to you? Ask yourself why this is. Do we remember some words more than others because they have greater personal meaning for us? Or do we remember them because they are more unusual? Once you have thought about this issue you may read on...

We often remember what happens at the beginning of a book, film, television program, or talk. These things tend to have prominence for us. What happens in the middle, however, tends to be more of a blur. Recent facts and events are also prominent in our minds. Could anyone forget the date 9/11? Things are also prominent when they are repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated, and repeated.

If something is **PROMINENT**, for whatever reason, it will tend to be remembered.

The same is true of things that have a pattern.

Texts of various kinds can be given prominence by all of these things. The problem with trying to create textual prominence though—and giving prominence to something is really a way of highlighting certain meanings and indicating that they are more important than others—is that it often has to be done against something that is not prominent.

That is why things that are exciting—whether they are objects, images, or texts —may only exist when there is a contrast with things that are not exciting.

Remember that what happens at the end of a book, film, television program, or talk will also tend to be more prominent in your mind than what happens in the middle of it.

HOW LIKE REAL SPEECH IS THIS DIALOGUE?

Textual meaning is read and understood in various ways depending on how it looks (its graphological features), how it sounds (its phonological features), and what it means (its semantic features). Some examples from the previous page are given in square brackets:

Personal pronouns. Using “I” is helpful if you want to create a personal feeling to the text. This also helps to individualize the speaker. Using “we,” on the other hand, has connotations of group definition and territoriality. [“I was in a book once.”]

Prosodic features. These are aspects of stress and intonation. They can be represented by typographical features such as different typefaces (e.g., size and shape), simulated handwriting (e.g., via different stylistic features), and by aspects of punctuation (e.g., italics and exclamation marks). [REALLY?]

Fluency and nonfluency features. Fluency concerns the extent to which the language flows; nonfluency concerns the extent to which it does not flow, but stutters and hesitates...[“So you can’t really read it...except, of course, if you inhabit my imagination.”]

Accent. Accent is often obvious in spoken language, although it may be suggested in written language by an alteration in standard spelling. [“Blimey!”]

Vocabulary. Vocabulary, whether from everyday conversations or regional accents, can show the age, gender, social class, and ethnicity of the persons involved. [“Anyway, I am concerned to know the designation of the book?”]

Repetition. Repetition is often used to emphasize points in stories (particularly those for children), advertisements, and political speeches. [HARE. *Book?* TORTOISE. Yes, the name of the book? HARE. *Book?*]

Grammar. Grammar, which concerns the way in which the sentences are constructed, may also be indicative of age, gender, social class, and ethnicity of the persons involved. [“I was the author of the book of which I have just spoken.”]

Interactive markers. Overlaps, interruptions, reinforcements that indicate understanding (or a lack of it), noises such as “er,” “mm,” “um,” “oh,” “yeah,” “ugh,” “eek,” and “aargh,” and monitoring expressions (phrases such as “you know”) are all interactive markers. [“Er, so was I?”]

Topic changes. Topic changes are often evident in both written and spoken language. [“TORTOISE. The library actually has a light reading section. Let me show you. HARE. Did you ever see *The Name of the Rose?*”]

COULD THIS BE TRUE?

The Postman Always Rings Twice is a film that was first made in 1946. I have used the title *The Postmodernist Always Reads Twice* because postmodernism is partly about how works cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but only with reference to one another.

“Intertextuality” is the word that is used to describe how works of various kinds (e.g., books, paintings, sculptures, designs, advertisements etc.) make reference—often in clever ways—to other works (i.e., other books, paintings, sculptures, designs, advertisements etc.). It also describes how the various meanings that these works create are interrelated. This can happen through translation, parody, pastiche, plagiarism, allusion, homage, echo, quotation, recycling, spoof, sequel, prequel, and remake. The references that works make to one another are often exemplified in terms of structure (e.g., the layout of one book might be copied from another book) or in terms of content (e.g., the plot, or else the names of the characters, might be the same).

“Intratextuality,” on the other hand, is used to describe the internal relationship between different parts of the same work. This can involve such things as the relationship between two chapters in the same book, between two people depicted in the same painting, or between two or more objects that form the same collection.

When it comes to the supposedly “imaginary” title of this book, knowing about the existence of this film enables you to understand the reference that is being made. And once you know where this “imaginary” title originates from, and why postmodernism is about how we understand the world through multiple references, you start to realize that there is not one way of reading and understanding such an “imaginary” title. In

this way, you may come to appreciate the self-referential joke that I have tried to make. Or is it a joke?

WHAT IS A PARATEXT?

WHAT IS A PARALANGUAGE?

Titles, dedications, acknowledgments, blurbs, epigraphs, prefaces, introductions, footnotes, illustrations, marginalia, erratum slips, endnotes, and indexes all count as paratexts. Paratexts stand outside the main body of a work and comment on it, or alter the meaning of it, in some way. The power of paratexts to change the meanings of texts can be seen if we consider the erratum slip. Suppose you are consulting a book on mushrooms. You are hoping to discover which mushrooms are good to eat from your local woods. However, an erratum slip falls from the book that says, "Page one, paragraph two, line three, should read: 'The False Morel mushroom is deadly.'" This erratum slip does more than correct an error. It undermines the whole book because if the author or publisher cannot get the facts right on the first page we may wish to conclude that the pages that follow will also be strewn with errors.

The paralanguage is about the nonverbal aspects of communication that work alongside, surround, or support a given text. These nonverbal aspects of communication may serve to support or modify the meaning of the main text. For instance, when we encounter a person speaking or reading from a book we have to attend to what he says, but also to his bodily position and posture, facial expressions, the gestures that he makes, the physical proximity that he has to ourselves, the clothing he wears, and whether he has established eye contact with us. In addition, we might note his tone of voice and any speaker effects that are in evidence, such as whether the piece of communication is accompanied by laughter or sadness. In other words, while we may identify a particular text as the central locus of meaning, there are things that

stand outside any given text that can influence, and change, the way that we understand and interpret it.

6

CHAPTER SIX

MATTERS OF INTERPRETATION

How would you interpret the following message: 10–2–4? As it stands, the message is almost impossible to understand. That is because we have no idea about how, where, why, or for what purpose it was made. Once you know its context, though, the meaning of the message is clear. This is the information you need to interpret the 10–2–4 message correctly.

The numbers 10–2–4 first appeared on the bottles and advertising of the Dr Pepper drink. They were based on a piece of research into fatigue that was conducted in 1927; this suggested that people's energy levels tended to drop to their lowest point at 10.30am, 2.30pm, and 4.30pm. As the Dr Pepper drink is supposed to give you energy, this research was meant to provide a reason for consuming the drink three times a day—which some people did. The company that made the drink

encouraged people to discover the correct interpretation of the message for themselves in the hope that this effort would make the message more palatable.

The obvious problem with a message like this is that we need to understand the code that is being used to decipher it. In this instance, it is quite difficult to discover what the code is. That is not to say, however, that all codes that we use in interpreting messages are equally hard to understand. In fact, the difference between messages like this, and most of the everyday messages that we encounter, is simply that the latter happen to be coded in a more recognizable and user-friendly form. In other words, all messages are coded, and all codes can be decoded (in principle, even if not always in practice), but some are easier to decode than others due to their familiarity. For example, warning signs, health advice posters, simple instruction booklets, food recipes, documentary photography, and news programs are seemingly straightforward to interpret because they contain messages that use codes with which we are familiar. This makes decoding them appear easy. In contrast, secret handshakes, cryptic crossword puzzles, the language and slang of youth cultures, academic jargon, police radio codes, and military signals are not easy to interpret because these messages make use of codes that are deliberately obscure. Decoding, in these cases, seems much more difficult.

Usually, when a message is difficult to interpret, we look beneath the surface for the deep structures, unconscious foundations, hidden symbols, and underlying patterns that may support it. If a message seems transparent, however, we tend not to look for these things. Part of the job of a semiotician, then, is to reveal those factors that provide and sustain the background for the various forms of communication in which we are interested, whether they seem difficult or easy to understand on the surface. Semioticians will do this because, by engaging in various forms of analysis, they may be able to expose just how much background information is needed for us to understand messages of all kinds, even those that appear on the surface to be wholly transparent.

All of this makes it seem as though interpretation has correctness as its ultimate aim. Certainly, this often is the ultimate aim. It almost goes

without saying that we should want to avoid misunderstandings, misconceptions, misjudgments, forms of misinformation, muddles, slip-ups, oversights, and mistakes. However, given that we are subject to all kinds of personal, social, cultural, and historical biases, this is frequently difficult to achieve. For this reason, it is important for us to dwell on the kinds of codes, conceptions, and conventions that we are using to interpret any message that is at hand. That way, we may become more aware of the assumptions, presuppositions, prejudices, and forms of partiality that we could be unconsciously entertaining due to any divergence that exists in our experiences or ways of thinking. There is often much more to such things as warning signs, health advice posters, simple instruction booklets, food recipes, documentary photography, and news programs than we may initially think in terms of the meaning that is being communicated. A warning sign about the speed limits on a certain road may reflect a political decision to attempt to influence the number of traffic accidents, while a health advice poster about sexual activity may reflect a deeper bias within a certain society about controlling the “moral” behavior of its citizens.

When it comes to the interpretation of signs, our understanding is mediated through the various concepts and conceptions we have of different kinds of subject matter; by the various connotations and denotations that objects, images, and texts can have; via the arrangements and laws for constructing cultural phenomena (*langue*), as well as the particular instances that are constructed by those arrangements and laws (*parole*); by the codes we have for combining different things to create an ordered sequence of signs (syntagm), and for making appropriate substitutions in that sequence (paradigm); through the distinction between individual tokens, and generic types, of thing; by the rules that we follow for using objects, images, and texts successfully; via classifications that allow us to categorize and organize things; through the conventions that draw on common forms of knowledge; and by the ways that we have devised for understanding (and misunderstanding) that which we think we know.

What this chapter will show is that interpretation, in theory, can go on forever. This is because we can always take things in new and different ways—and we frequently do so. After all, part of the perennial qualities of authors such as Shakespeare, composers such as Bach, painters

such as Leonardo, and sculptors such as Michelangelo is that they can, and will, be subject to new interpretations as history unfolds. In practice, though, we would do well to remember that interpretation ends when we need to arrive at conclusions or when we have reached a situation where action is required.

CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OAK TREES AND ELM TREES?

Different kinds of information, as well as different amounts of information, can inform our concepts. Take the concepts “oak” and “elm.” Suppose we are talking to a neighbor about the trees in our garden. We mention that we have had our oaks and elms pruned during the year. Perhaps the neighbor understands what is being said even though they cannot, with any degree of certainty, identify which tree is which. In this case, the information that our neighbor has coded into the concepts “oak” and “elm” just happen to be of a rather general treelike kind.

Now imagine that there is a second neighbor who is good at distinguishing oaks from elms. This neighbor can tell the difference between the two kinds of tree by how the trunks look, by the characteristics of the leaves, and by the size and shape of each canopy. This neighbor has an understanding of oaks and elms that includes a sound recognitional ability, and so although they are using the same concepts as the first neighbor, their conception of (or thoughts about) the concepts “oak” and “elm” are rather more sophisticated.

Suppose that there is also a third neighbor. This neighbor is an expert in biology. He knows how to recognize the trees in question, but he also knows that oak trees belong to the genus *Quercus* and the family *Fagaceae* and that elm trees belong to the genus *Ulmus* and the family *Ulmaceae*. As he has a scientific knowledge of oaks and elms his understanding is even more sophisticated than those of the previous neighbors. (Notice, though, that someone may have a general grasp of what oaks and elms are and be able to give a biological description of

them, without necessarily having an ability to recognize them. For instance, a person who lives in a country where oaks and elms do not grow may not be able to recognize them.)

If people can have different information coded into the concepts that they use, then their conceptions (or thoughts) about those concepts will tend to differ. That is why ordinary folk, gardeners, and biologists may have quite different thoughts about, and interpretations of, oaks and elms even though they may talk to each other using the very same concepts.

IS THIS EXCLAMATION AMBIGUOUS?

When we speak it is important for the purposes of interpretation to know not just *what* is said (denotation) but *how* it is said (connotation). Suppose I am asked what I think about a particular text and I reply, “What nice handwriting!” This comment has a single denotation. It denotes the quality of the handwriting. Yet it may have a literal connotation (i.e., the person does really have nice handwriting) or a nonliteral connotation (i.e., that nice handwriting is about the only thing they have). Put another way, the connotation of the words “What nice handwriting!” depends very specifically on the context in question and the way in which the words are uttered.

To understand connotation and denotation in images, consider how two photographs might be taken of the same person at the same time from the same position. Suppose that the first photograph taken is in color with a soft focus and gentle contrasts. Now imagine that the second photograph taken is in black-and-white with a clear focus and strong contrasts. Each of the two photographs has the same denotation (i.e., the same things are represented), but is different in terms of connotation (i.e., they don’t have the same meaning). This is because denotation is concerned with *what* is photographed, while connotation is concerned with *how* it is photographed.

The distinction between connotation and denotation applies equally to objects. Take clothes. When we wear clothes it is important not just *what* we wear (denotation) but *how* we wear them (connotation). You can wear exactly the same clothes on two occasions (denotation) but they can mean something different if the occasions on which, and the purposes for which, they are worn are dissimilar (connotation). For

instance, there is a considerable difference between wearing a police uniform as a genuine police officer and wearing it as fancy dress to a party. In the first instance, the police uniform may be worn in an uptight, formal fashion to establish authority. In the second instance, it may be worn in a relaxed, informal fashion to create amusement.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS MENU?

“*Langue*” and “*parole*” are technical terms in semiotics. “*Langue*” denotes the code (or structure, system, plan, construction, or set of rules) for the object, image, or text that is being used, whereas “*parole*” is about the particular instance of use that has been produced. *Langue*, then, provides the organizational means for each individual example of *parole*. Here are some examples:



As we can see, each code, structure, system, plan, construction, or set of rules (*langue*) does something to regulate, and give meaning to, its use in a particular instance (*parole*).

For example, an individual menu (*parole*) will conform to the general arrangement that menus tend to have in terms of layout and structure (*langue*). In order for a menu to function there will need to be a choice from a selection of interchangeable parts (e.g., from different kinds of starters, entrées, and desserts), which may then be combined to reflect such things as taste, fashion, practicality, and fit with certain social occasions and norms. (Think here of the design of a menu for a formal dinner as opposed to a birthday party.)

Menus, we might say, have a grammar that reflects the practices of eating. But notice that the standard arrangement of a menu may need to be changed in certain circumstances. Such a change would be required if you tried to live your life backward. In such a case you might want a menu like the one on the previous page.

IS IT ODD TO COMBINE CLOTHES IN THIS WAY?

In the images on the previous page there is a mismatch between the clothes and the hats. Social rules dictate that the top hat should be combined with the suit and the cricket cap should be combined with the cricketing outfit. This is not to say that you cannot combine clothes in the way shown, it is just that doing so will tend to create a comic effect, which is fine if this is the effect that the wearer wants to achieve.

Different societies use different cultural codes to regulate how clothes are combined. These codes may reflect preexisting canons of taste (e.g., “Ought I to wear red pants with green shoes?”), social demands (e.g., “Which group will I identify myself with by wearing a bandana?”), or ritual episodes (e.g., “How should I dress if I am going to a job interview as opposed to a sports event?”).

When we put clothes together to form an ensemble we call this a “syntagm.” A syntagm is any combination of things that conform to a specified set of social rules.

That is why, when we notice the inappropriateness of the combination of clothes that a friend has assembled for the purpose of going to a funeral, we may say: “Your somber shirt goes with this dark pair of pants, but not with this jolly pair of yellow socks, which will undermine the serious mood of the event.”

In addition to the rules of combination that form a syntagm, there are rules of substitution that form what is called a “paradigm.” A paradigm is created by the social rules that dictate when one thing can be substituted, added, or removed in a certain system without that system being undermined overall. Take clothes as our example once again. If

we wish to dress casually then we can substitute different kinds of T-shirt with the one we are wearing without it necessarily affecting the overall casual clothing “syntagm” that we are trying to create. What we cannot do is substitute a formal dress shirt for this T-shirt, as this will undermine the casual effect that is intended.

HOW MANY WORDS ARE THERE IN THIS BOX?

How you interpret these questions depends on whether you think of the words as tokens or types. The number of tokens is the same as the number of words in the box. In the first box there are 72 tokens of the word “many.” In the second box there are 72 tokens of the word “one.” But in each box there is only one word of the same type. In the first box, “many” is the type of word that is being used. And in the second box “one” is the type of word that is being used. Notice here that different tokens of the same type of word may be interpreted in different ways according to how they are produced. Here are three tokens of the same type of word, each with a different emphasis: smell, Smell, SMELL. In this instance, each token may be interpreted in a different way because of the variation in emphasis that it has been given.

The token and type distinction can be applied to objects and images just as much as to texts. A particular bronze sculpture can exist as a token object in a specific museum. But if we know that more than one bronze sculpture has been cast from the original mold then we might expect to encounter bronze sculptures of exactly the same type in other places. Similarly, a print (e.g., an etching) can exist as a series of tokens if there is a printed edition of it. Each token print (given that it is printed from the same plate) is an example of the same type. The same distinction between tokens and types holds for replicas (e.g., decorative moldings), duplicates (e.g., wills), facsimiles (e.g., manuscripts), carbon copies (e.g., letters), reproductions (e.g., furniture), reprintings (e.g., books), and models (e.g., cars).

Somewhat surprisingly, what holds for objects, images, and texts holds also for thoughts. If two people say the words “I like semiotics,” they will each be uttering a different individual token of the sentence, but they will be having a thought of the same type.

WHAT ARE THE RULES FOR USING THIS CORKSCREW?

When faced with everyday objects we follow the rules that we think will allow us to use them successfully. The rules for using a corkscrew are simple enough. They are:

1. Grasp the handle of the corkscrew firmly and insert the screw thread into the bottle by twisting it in a clockwise direction.
2. Once the thread has been fully inserted into the cork, draw slowly on the handle of the corkscrew while maintaining a tight grip on the bottle with your other hand until the cork is released.

These rules are fine for a right-handed person using a right-handed corkscrew. However, they are wrong, or at least misleading, for a right-handed person who is attempting to use a left-handed corkscrew. This is because the thread on a left-handed corkscrew (like the one shown on the previous page) goes in the opposite direction. To use a left-handed corkscrew successfully you need to turn it in an anticlockwise direction.

What we should learn from the example of the left-handed corkscrew is just how much we rely on interpreting certain rules correctly, and just how much our success in doing so depends on hidden assumptions, social customs, cultural norms, kinds of conformity, forms of training, traditions of use, and educated propensities. The rules that we use are important to reflect upon directly because we often fail to see just how much our behavior and our actions depend upon them. Indeed, every day we are faced with objects that have tacit instructions for their use, images that have masked codes for their interpretation, and texts that

obey the, often hidden, regulations that are set by the institution of language. In failing to notice these rules we also fail to see the opportunities for questioning them and thereby creating new codes and forms of meaning.

DOES THE WOMAN IN THE CENTER OF THIS PICTURE LOOK REAL?

In Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1485–86) we see a woman about to step on to the seashore from a giant shell. There is something odd about this figure. The elongation of her neck, the curious sloping of her shoulders, the awkwardness of her arms and legs, and the sheer length of her body all go to make her seem unnatural in some way. There is actually an obvious explanation for these anatomical peculiarities: this is not a real woman. It is the goddess of love and beauty, Venus. So what is being represented is an ideal of beauty. That is why Botticelli uses elongation and distortion in the picture. The only difficulty is that to interpret this message you have to understand the conventions that are being used. Conventions are agreed systems of understanding that allow us to interpret what is happening. In this instance, you need to understand that by elongating the human body—a convention still to be found in contemporary fashion drawing—Botticelli idealizes the female form in order to make it more beautiful.

Conventions are often so much part of a culture that we fail to realize that the codes they use are not always transparent to cultures other than our own. Just how much we assume about the transparency of certain common codes can be seen from a plaque that was put on the *Pioneer F* spacecraft, a probe that was sent into space in the 1970s. The plaque had a line drawing of two human beings, a man and a woman. Its purpose was to communicate the presence of human life on earth in such a simple way that any intelligent form of life that might happen to come across it in space would be able to interpret it immediately. However, in order to read the intended message any alien form of life would have to understand that the lines stand for contours,

that the figures are in perspective, and that the right hand of the man (which is raised) is supposed to signify a greeting. Yet even supposing that the intended audience of aliens had eyes, which in itself is a big assumption, it is still quite unclear that the message could be understood without the requisite knowledge of the conventions of pictorial representation that have, unwittingly, been supposed to be wholly transparent by those who made the drawing.

IS THIS ART?

The way we classify things is important. The botanical sciences would never have made progress had it not been for the orderly cataloging of flora. Libraries and museums would not have grown without the highly developed systems that were devised for organizing and arranging their collections. And governments of all periods would not have been able to function without some way of categorizing and grading information into that which is, and that which is not, confidential.

The need for classification is clearly evident from many human fields. Progress itself seems to depend on it. However, while certain things seem to be amenable to classification, others do not. For instance, what sorts of things should we classify as art? Here are some possible responses:

1. All the things that people are generally disposed to call “art.”
2. All the things that connoisseurs of art call “art.”
3. All the things that I call “art.”
4. All the things that are displayed in art galleries with the purpose of being viewed as art.
5. All the things that are called “art” by artists.
6. All the things that common sense tells us are art.
7. All the things that have the intrinsic properties of art. 8. All the things that cause an artistic reaction in the viewer.

Each of these responses provides a very different answer, and hence a very different principle of classification. There is, respectively, a concern with (1) The Public, (2) The Expert, (3) The Self, (4) The Institution of the Museum or Gallery, (5) The Artist, (6) The Discriminations of Common Sense, (7) The Qualities of the Object, (8) Our Aesthetic Response to Objects.

When it comes to Marcel Duchamp's famous *Fountain* (1917) (or urinal) we find that there is no definitive answer as to whether or not it is art. For there is no independent fact to which we can appeal to decide the matter once and for all. In a way, then, the point of Duchamp's piece may be to raise the question about the scope and limits of art rather than to give an answer as to what art is.

WHAT DOES THIS GESTURE SIGNIFY?

Gestures are rich in meaning. As a condensed nonverbal source of communication, they appear to be a troublefree way to express approval or disapproval, affection or disaffection, and assent or dissent.

Some gestures, such as pointing, have meanings that appear to be more or less universal. Others, however, such as the thumbs-up sign and its cousin the thumbs-down sign, seem to have different meanings in different contexts. For instance, the thumbs-up sign, when used in the West by pilots before takeoff or by hitchhikers wanting a ride, is interpreted in an affirmative fashion. However, the very same gesture in the Middle East is viewed in the opposite way, and can be insulting. So even a simple gesture such as this can produce grave misunderstandings when interpreted in the wrong way.

The history of the thumbs-down sign is an intriguing one. This sign, which was popular in many Hollywood epics that involved gladiatorial combat, was thought to have been used by the ancient Romans to signal death. However, it seems that Hollywood promoted a misinterpretation of the sign. This misinterpretation arose because Hollywood followed the example set by Jean-Léon Gérôme, a French academic painter, in his 1872 work *Pollice Verso*. When researching his picture, Gérôme mistranslated the Latin word for “turned in” to “turned down,” so, rather than using the correct Roman sign for death (i.e., the turned-in thumb accompanied by a stabbing motion toward the chest), he employed the thumbs-down sign. It is curious that this misunderstanding has now become so entrenched that the original meaning of the thumbs-down sign has almost been lost.

7

CHAPTER SEVEN

FRAMING MEANING

Starting with different units of meaning, this chapter will build a framework that will allow us to understand communication in terms of the wider context of society and culture. The notions we will examine are as follows:

In order to understand how objects, images, and texts fit with the groupings we have just defined, I have given some examples of their application below:

Chair (Semantic Unit)

Office furniture (Genre)

Functional (Style)

Store (Institution)

An object with a standard seat, four legs, and a back (Stereotype)

Consumerism (Ideology)

Need (Discourse)

Practicality (Myth)

Modernism (Paradigm)

We can explain this example quite simply. A chair (Semantic Unit) might be a piece of office furniture (Genre) that is practical, with an appearance that is functional (Style). Thanks to the exclusive emphasis on function, this type of furniture may be rather bland (Stereotype). Purchased from a store (Institution), this piece of furniture might be viewed in the wider context of consumer society, one where the value of buying and selling goods seems obvious to everyone (Ideology). In terms of justifying this purchase, we might talk about the need to avoid backache (Discourse) because of the long periods sat at our office desk. Here, the language of practicality (Myth) might also be invoked. Finally, our understanding of the piece of furniture in question may be framed by the epoch that contributed most to functionality and practicality in design, namely Modernism (Paradigm).

The concepts we have articulated apply equally to images and texts. Here are two more examples:

Painting (Semantic Unit)

Portraiture (Genre)

Academic (Style)

A lifelike depiction of a sitter (Stereotype)

Gallery (Institution)

Naturalism (Ideology)

Objectivity (Discourse)

Genius (Myth)

Realism (Paradigm)

A painting (Semantic Unit) might be a portrait (Genre), executed in an academic manner (Style), with a corresponding attempt to be lifelike in its execution (Stereotype). Exhibited in a gallery (Institution), the picture might present itself as a naturalistic and detached view of the sitter (Ideology). The description that accompanies the picture might speak of the objectivity of vision (Discourse), the rare talent and skill of the artist who carried it out (Myth), and the tradition of realism in which it should be viewed (Paradigm).

Book (Semantic Unit)

Children's story (Genre)

Informal (Style)

The fairy tale (Stereotype)

Library (Institution)

Educational (Ideology)

Learning (Discourse)

Innocence (Myth)

Victorianism (Paradigm)

A book (Semantic Unit) might be a children's story (Genre), written in an informal fashion (Style). It could be a familiar fairy tale (Stereotype), and it might be borrowed from a library (Institution). The jacket of the book could highlight the educational opportunities that the reading of the book affords (Ideology) and in so doing describe the moral lessons that may be learned from it (Discourse).

The parent reading the jacket of the book may interpret its content in

terms of childhood innocence (Myth), and by way of certain received Victorian ideals concerning the purity of youth (Paradigm).

The context that helps us to situate and provide the meaning for a given semantic unit may not always be as straightforward as these examples might imply. This is because two genres may have coalesced in a single work (e.g., romance and comedy in film); the style of a piece may be reinterpreted as it starts to date (e.g., 1920s clothing now looks quaint); the stereotype of something may have become more well known (e.g., the brutalist tower blocks of the 1960s); and the location of an object may have shifted (e.g., a classic chair may have moved from a home to a museum). Moreover, when we try to make a judgment about meaning we could find that ideologies may be competing, that discourses may be overlapping, that myths may be evolving, and that alternative paradigms may be coexisting; all of these could serve to alter the interpretation we assign to the particular work we have chosen to study.

The exact details of the context for a particular semantic unit, then, is vital to appreciate and understand if meaning (or possible meaning) is to be forthcoming. This is because when a context for a specific semantic unit is misdescribed, underdescribed, or simply missing, our ability to engage in an analysis of it will be impaired. Of course, the idea that a given semantic unit may have a final and complete context that is free of any possible confusion as regards its meaning is one that we should perhaps reject. The reason for this is that new times will always provide for the possibility of new contexts and therefore new interpretations. New interpretations that enable us to view a piece of work in a fresh way must always be welcome, particularly where those interpretations help to invigorate our experiences or strengthen our understanding.

HOW SHOULD WE JUDGE THIS IMAGE?

Semantic units are discrete items of communication that have actual and potential meanings. A semantic unit is an aspect or part of a thing, a thing itself, or a collection of things that can be identified as distinct elements of communication.

Text-based semantic units are the easiest to identify: they consist of words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, or books. We know this because when we are unable to understand a particular textual element we can ask: “What does this particular word/sentence/paragraph/page/chapter/book mean?”

With images, the issue is more difficult. A painting can have brush-marks, lines, tones, textures, colors, and different parts, all of which can be identified as meaningful—of course the picture as a whole has a meaning too. Once again, we can identify the semantic unit in question by picking out that which is not understood by asking: “What does this particular mark/line/tone/texture/color/part of the image/whole image mean?”

Parts of objects, objects themselves, and collections of objects can be thought of as semantic units too. In this instance, when we are mystified we might ask: “What does this part of the object, this whole object, or this collection of objects mean?”

One problem with semantic units is in knowing exactly where one begins and the other ends. This might happen, for example, in a case where there seem to be two individual photographs that completely overlap (as on the previous page). Here we have two choices. Either we can treat the image as a mistake and try to read each of the semantic

units of which it is composed separately, or we can treat the image as a whole semantic unit and assign it a single set of meanings. Which option we choose in this case may depend on what we think was the intention of the photographer.

For the purposes of this chapter we will look at semantic units as complete things (e.g., books, paintings, chairs), while tending to ignore the problem of parts, collections, and the issues of overlap.

IS THIS A LANDSCAPE OR A PORTRAIT?

Genres are categories that conform to a certain division or subdivision of a particular medium. Design has the genres of graphics, multimedia, furniture, product, industrial, domestic ware, textiles, and fashion. Magazines have the genres of advice, entertainment, information, and instruction. Television has genres of news, soap opera, education, and comedy. Books have the genres of the novel, the diary, biography, history, and poetry.

The genres just listed can obviously be further divided— though whether we want to say that the divisions are themselves genuine genres is open to debate. Furniture design can be for the home, work, or leisure. Magazines can offer advice that is serious or light. Television news can be factual or anecdotal. Poetry books may be confessional or descriptive.

Each semantic unit, whether object-, image-, or text-based, will often be communicated through a well-established genre. The genre chosen will tend to set up a series of codes that allow the communicative act to take place successfully. These communicative acts will often only be truly productive when they conform to the rules of the genre in question (i.e., when there is some shared understanding of what the genre requires). One of the rules of film is that there cannot be a change of genre halfway through. For example, a science fiction film should not suddenly change in the middle to a western. Making this switch is forbidden because it would confuse the audience. The same is true of a news report that starts with some serious event and ends with a piece of gossip.

The painting by Thomas Gainsborough of *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (c.

1750) on the previous page presents us with an apparent exception to this rule in that it appears to combine portrait and landscape. So why is this allowed? The obvious answer is that the picture depicts a moment where two genres coalesce. In this sense it is rather like the way in which some films combine the genres of romance and comedy. What this shows is that a single semantic unit can contain melded genres but not genres that are sequential.

WHAT KIND OF PERSON HAS WRITTEN THIS SENTENCE?

A style is a manner of doing something. The style in which something is done can influence how a message is received. This is true of the sentence on the previous page. The elegant typeface in which the sentence “I am not a criminal” is written seems to make it more believable.

When it comes to message-making we should not forget that the form of the message matters as much as the content. To demonstrate this point, compare the following examples:

What is remarkable here is just how much the style of typeface can influence how we feel about the sentence.

Different styles can be exemplified in writing, painting, designing, dressing, acting, walking, talking, and even thinking. If we undertake any of these activities then we will be sure to do so in a way that is distinctive and personal. It is always within our power to develop our own particular and individual style of writing, painting, designing, dressing, acting, walking, talking, or thinking. At the same time, however, our own way of doing these things will tend to make reference to a more general way of doing them. In other words, while there are individual styles, these usually partake of styles that are social and cultural in origin. Thus, the way in which we talk will not be independent of a community of people who talk in a similar way, for example in terms of accent. The accent that you have will always be a cultural and stylistic variation of a particular language.

WHAT MAKES THIS WORK OF ART NONSTEREOTYPICAL?

A stereotype is a generalized idea of something. There can be stereotypes of different kinds of objects, images, texts, animals, plants, people, or groups of people. These stereotypes often derive from certain observations, thoughts, or prejudices that may or may not be grounded in fact. For example, the stereotype of a woman car driver is of someone who lacks certain competences in driving. Yet the stereotype is not accurate. If it were accurate then insurance companies would be right to charge women more to insure their cars than men. What we find, however, is that men are charged more because in reality they tend to be less competent drivers than women.

Stereotypes are sometimes helpful to us. They can give us a shortcut to understanding a certain thing or situation. At the same time, however, they tend to be rather inflexible and simplistic. We might think, for example, of an artwork in terms of certain stereotypical materials. Sculptures, for instance, tend traditionally to be made from stone, bronze, or wood. Sculptors of the twentieth century, though, broke away from these stereotypical materials and used such things as glass, plastic, concrete, and even waste.

Carl André's *Equivalent VIII* is an example of what is called Minimalist sculpture. It consists of two piles of ordinary bricks laid out in an oblong. One might say that it provides a challenge to the stereotype of what sculpture is, but also to our notion of how art is valued (not least because the Tate Gallery in London paid \$12,000 to buy it in 1972). Another answer as to what makes it nonstereotypical is that it is made from everyday materials. (Though in recording these answers we might

also wonder whether the assumption that the question makes, namely that this is a genuine work of art, is right in the first place.)

HOW MIGHT THE DISPLAY OF AN OBJECT INFLUENCE HOW WE FEEL ABOUT IT?

As institutions, museums are characterized by the fact that they remove objects, images, and texts from the typical arenas of production, consumption, ownership, use, and exchange that they tend to inhabit. By making the museum into a sanctified zone for display, objects, images, and texts (i.e., various semantic units) are thereby abstracted from the concreteness of the social and historical practices in which they normally participate. The objects, images, and texts that are displayed in the museum are usually enhanced through the presentational codes of staging. By putting objects in glass cabinets, by raising sculptures on plinths, by putting pictures in ornate frames, by lighting books in a reverential fashion, by providing academic and quasiacademic forms of written information on invitation cards and labels, and in catalogs, leaflets, handouts, and pamphlets, or by simply placing rope around an area of display in order to cordon it off, the pieces on show are set apart from the spectator. And this in turn serves to remind the museum-goer of the sense of reverence that they are expected to have toward what has been put on display.

Just like the museum, other institutions act to regulate cultural meanings and the social behavior that goes with them. Churches regulate meanings and forms of behavior through their holy books, by designated areas of worship, and through the prescribed courses of action that go with the ceremonies that they have devised. Houses regulate meanings and behavior by the way in which such things as walls, windows, fences, doors, locks, bars, and other security devices are configured to create segregation. Courts of law regulate meanings and forms of behavior through the layout of their rooms and corridors

(thus keeping lawyers, jurors, and the accused apart), and by rules of procedure (which dictate the formal modes of address that control the interactions between participants).

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS MAP?

On this “upside-down” map of the world Africa, rather than Europe, appears to be at the center. This makes it seem wrong, though in reality it is not wrong, but merely presenting an alternative view of things, or ideology, that may actually help us to see the world in a different way.

Ideologies are about ideas: what they are and how they are formed. Ideas are not natural. On the contrary, they arise from, and can be explained in terms of, particular forms of society and culture. The key question for those interested in ideology in relation to semiotics is just how our ideas fit into larger systems and structures of meaning that particular societies and cultures create and enforce. To answer that question, though, we need first to understand the various forms that ideology might take. Ideology might be understood as either:

1. A system of beliefs and desires that are characteristic of the value system of a particular class, group, or culture. Political beliefs tend to be like this. Thus right-wing ideology tends to place value on tradition, authority, and hierarchy, whereas left-wing ideology tends to place value on equality, liberty, and community.
2. A system of illusory beliefs or desires that can be contrasted with beliefs or desires that are true. Marxists view ideology in this way. Thus Marxists argue that by the propagation of certain ideas the working class is tricked into accepting an economic and social order where the upper class is in charge.
3. The general process through which our systems of belief and desire are produced and consumed. On this view, various parts of a society or culture act to produce (and also make available to consume) certain

styles of thought or ways of thinking. For instance, popular newspapers tend to promote the ideology of the person who is of value to society just because they are rich or famous.

WHAT DOES THIS THRONE SAY ABOUT THE PERSON WHO MIGHT SIT IN IT?

Discourse analysis tends to focus on language and the contexts of its meanings, but objects (and images) set up and sustain discourses of their own. For example, the throne of a king (like the one on the previous page) sets up its own discourse. It is a discourse that is meant to give authority and status to its user.

In general, discourses help to form our ideas about the world through regulated forms of use. Discourses consist of different areas of knowledge, norms of “lived” experience, structures of organization, systems of regulation, and kinds of identity. Discourses set the boundaries of these things through established forms that create or reflect particular aspects of society and culture. For example, there are professional discourses (evident in the expert languages of law or medicine), discourses of competition (prevalent in Western ideas of economics and political economy), discourses of solidarity (made manifest through various religions and via the idea of a nation state), discourses of learning (manufactured and sustained by established education systems), discourses of sexism (palpable in the expressions, both verbal and visual, of individuals who think that men are superior in some way to women), and many others, all of which both shape and replicate our attitudes to different people, styles of living, institutions, objects, images, and texts.

Take the discourses of cleanliness (which partake of the more general discourses that focus on health) as an example. The discourses of cleanliness, which since the Victorian period have been prevalent in Western culture, are promoted in different ways and through different

media (e.g., educational leaflets, television news stories, housekeeping books, tips in glossy magazines, and advertisements for cleaning products). These discourses act in different ways, and through different media, to make what is known—that cleanliness is important for sustaining good health—seem to be simply a matter of common sense. Indeed, this is the aim of all dominant discourses: to make what is a cultural and societal product seem to be natural and self-evident.

DO THE LIVES OF ARTISTS INFLUENCE HOW WE SEE THEIR PICTURES?

Myths help us to understand the world. We tend to think of myths as being ancient stories that are probably not true. But in the more general sense a myth may be considered true, partly true, or else simply false. It all depends on the myth in question and the function that it serves. There are numerous kinds of myth. There are urban myths (stories that, whether true or not, are supposed to give us some moral insight), product myths (products that, whether they really do so or not, are supposed to bring us such things as health, wealth, or happiness when we purchase them), and image myths (images that, whether they really do so, appear to enhance our social standing or the social standing of others). There are also more specific myths: the myth of childhood (the idea that our youth was a time of innocence, naturalness, and freedom); the myth of the self (the idea that the self is a single thing that has its very own distinctive thoughts, beliefs, and desires); and the myth of the countryside (the idea of a place where we can experience unadulterated nature). Other myths that dominate contemporary society include the myths of science, politics, religion, design, art, and the lives of the rich and famous.

One of the most interesting myths is that of the artist. The lives of artists are often seen as dramatic. This is particularly true of Vincent van Gogh. We think of him in poverty, we contemplate his fatalistic love affairs, we speculate about the severing of part of his ear, and we wonder over his mental turmoil and final death. All these biographical details cannot fail to influence how we view his work as they all go to form the myth of Van Gogh. However, imagine that out of the blue someone discovers that these details are untrue. Van Gogh, it turns out,

lived a blissfully happy life. Would this be enough to change the myth and hence the meanings of all of his pictures? In particular, would you then view the painting on the previous page as something other than melancholic?

WHAT DO THESE DOODLES MEAN?

Sigmund Freud made these doodles. Once you know this do you see them in a more Freudian way? We know that Freud emphasized the importance of hidden desires. Therefore, maybe he was expressing his own hidden desires when he made these doodles.

In general, our readings of objects, images, and texts are framed by what we call paradigms. A paradigm is a way of seeing the world through a highly structured framework of concepts, procedures, and results. And so, given that Freud made these doodles, what we see in them may be structured by particular Freudian concepts (e.g., the unconscious, the psyche), procedures (e.g., the process of analysis), and results (e.g., the identification of a complex or phobia). In particular, these drawings appear to show spirals that are descending. For this reason they might represent a journey into the depths of the mind itself, or they may say something about Freud's own subconscious fear of falling into some hole or recess. Perhaps they indicate a fear that is sexual in some way.

Now suppose that these drawings were not by Freud. Instead, imagine that they were by Albert Einstein. Would that change how you read them? If you think it would, then is this because you would start to apply a different set of concepts, procedures, and results to them (i.e., those that you associate with the work of Einstein)? Such a radical alteration in your perception is called a paradigm shift. A paradigm shift happens when an alternative way of thinking is provided by a new set of concepts, results, and procedures. The change in perception takes place due to the new framework or theory that you now use to interpret your experience.

A paradigm shift in this instance would take place if you shifted your interpretation from a Freudian one to an Einsteinian one.*

**Freud did, in fact, draw these images.*

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CHAPTER EIGHT

STORIES AND STORYTELLING

Human beings are the only animals that tell stories. We find human stories in every geographical location, in every historical period, and in every culture. Stories, then, seem to transcend international, historical, and cultural boundaries.

As stories are so ubiquitous this might lead us to think that they have a function. So why do we tell stories? There are various reasons: to give instruction, to provide hope, to control behavior, to transmit ideas in a memorable form, to enhance social cohesion, and to give human beings a better way of understanding themselves and others in terms of their needs, desires, motivations, and actions. All of these reasons and more can be used to explain our need to tell stories.

What forms do stories take? Novels, films, plays, operas, comics, TV

soaps, cartoons, and biographies are the forms that are most familiar to us. In stories that use forms such as these we find that there is a surface structure and a deep structure. Here is a simple list of the general elements that might make up a particular narrative in terms of these two levels:

The surface structure is often obvious. For example, it might be that we can describe the surface structure of a certain story as being about a man who is forced to confront a monster, in the most general sense, that appears to have powers that are almost supernatural in terms of their strength. This is true whether we are thinking about the ancient stories such as the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*; the fairy tale of *Hansel and Gretel*, or the classic 1970s film *Jaws*. In all of these stories, it appears that there is a physical battle between fragile humans and a robust and seemingly unbeatable and ruthless monster that the former must engage with and overcome. However, the underlying structure of these stories may be rather different. This is because the monster is not just a monster; it represents something more abstract and universal than is immediately evident from its seemingly very concrete and particular form. The monster often appears to represent the more general fear that we have that something from outside could threaten our community, country, or even the world itself. So whether the monster in question appears in the form of a giant, devil, ghost, Martian, dragon, triffid, dictator, outlaw, psychopath, witch, shark, deadly virus, earthquake, or volcano need not matter. What matters is the lesson that is drawn from the story. In the case of “overcoming the monster” stories, the deeper lesson may be the same: that only by great feats of resistance to the forces of darkness may we finally triumph over evil or adversity and preserve our current way of life.

This is not to say, of course, that all the stories we tell one another take on an obvious narrative form. In a rather less obvious way, we need to recognize that even books on history, television news, gossip columns, TV documentaries, performances of mime, stained glass windows, everyday objects of design, some paintings, and most advertisements involve, in many instances, some form of storytelling.

So are there any areas of life or any disciplines where stories are not told? What, for instance, about science? Surely science is about facts and not about storytelling? The response here might be to say that while science does not involve storytelling directly, it often describes its progress in a form that is storylike. After all, science often starts with mystery. The mystery then leads to a conflict (usually within the scientific community), which continues until there is a major turning point (which may consist of a discovery). When other scientists can reproduce this discovery, both the mystery and the conflict disappear, and that tends to result in a resolution within that community. These factors—mystery, conflict, turning point, and resolution—are the same as those that we frequently find in storytelling. So even if we wanted to conclude that science does not tell stories, we would have to admit that it uses key features of storytelling to explain itself.

Human beings have always searched for a way to reveal who and what they are. While philosophers have sought to develop a grand scheme or theory that would serve to explain the nature of human beings and society, storytellers have found something that, although not a “grand scheme” or “theory,” does, in all its diversity and multiplicity, help us to say what we are and why. Stories and storytelling have what we might call a “totalizing force” for human beings. Stories are the master structures that guide and inform both our most lighthearted as well as our most profound beliefs, desires, thoughts, and interactions. Stories expose our most intense worries and our greatest hopes; they give expression to our outward feelings and they help us to record the deepest of our inner monologues. I have tried in this last chapter, then, to discuss the concepts that are central to stories and storytelling. They are: fact and fiction, narratives, legends, characters and personas, viewpoints, mysteries, tensions, turning points, and resolutions. By studying the stories that we tell to one another, we may begin to reveal what it is that makes us truly human.

DID CHRIST REALLY DIE ON THE CROSS?

There are all kinds of questions about Christ. Was he a real man? Was he the son of God? Are the stories that are told about him factual? Or are they merely fictional?

One of the most powerful images in Western art is that of Christ on the cross (represented in this instance by Masolino [1383–1447]). It is an image that has been repeated by artists over hundreds of years. Yet it is easy to forget that this symbol of crucifixion is just that: a symbol. The reason that we should regard it as symbolic, and not as historically accurate, is because it is not the same shape as the crosses that were commonly used by the Romans for the purpose of crucifixion. The Romans, instead of using the Latin—or long—cross, used a T-shaped cross. And so it is likely that if they crucified Jesus then this is the type of cross that they would have used. The symbolic nature of the cross also helps to explain why there are different symbols for Christ's death: the X-shaped cross (of St. Andrew), the Greek-shaped cross (with its arms of equal length), and the Maltese cross (with its serif-like edges).

What matters in this Biblical story is not its factual accuracy—as the early Christians did not allow images to be made to represent the crucifixion there are no good ways to check on the facts—but the moral that lies behind it. The crucifixion is one of the greatest moral stories ever told. And in reading the Bible we should remember that the emphasis is on telling stories that have a meaning for human action rather than (say) on a reporting of mere events from which lessons may be learned. If the Bible were written like a court report then it might be appropriate to read it in that way, but because, for the most part, it is written like a story, it would be wise to read it as one.

WHAT MAKES THIS A STORY?

If we were told a story about a boy who met a girl, immediately won her over, and lived happily ever after, then the story would not be very interesting. It is only if a story presents a problem and a series of tasks to be overcome, that our interest in it will be sustained.

One feature of this simple story that makes it engaging is the real sense of loss that the boy feels at losing the girl. This loss can occur at different points in the story. And according to where it occurs the ending will be either happy or sad. In the traditional format of the story we have a happy ending: boy meets girl; boy loses girl (unhappy); boy wins girl back (happy). But the story can be reversed: boy meets girl; boy wins girl (happy); boy loses girl (unhappy). What is important to both stories is that there is some significant event that provides a disturbance that gives rise to a disequilibrium between the two characters. This disequilibrium is what leads to drama.

Various sorts of disturbance, both large and small, that serve to create a disequilibrium in a story can be seen in film, literature, art, design, and advertising. Take advertising as an example. Creating different kinds of disturbance that lead to a feeling of disequilibrium is one of the most popular techniques used to sell products. This is because when an advertisement creates a feeling of “disturbance” in a customer—and this usually manifests itself in terms of dissatisfaction—then there will be a chance to return the customer to a feeling of equilibrium once more through a purchase. So a pang of hunger will provide for the possibility of selling food. A feeling of extreme discomfort will provide for the possibility of selling painkillers. A worry about our attractiveness will provide for the possibility of selling cosmetics. A sense of inferiority will

provide for the possibility of selling all manner of goods and services that will enhance our status.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN THIS STORY?

A strange thing happened to my best friend, Alex Baker. Every day Alex would catch the bus to work. Invariably, at the first stop, a blind man would get on, pay his fare, and sit down next to him. One day the blind man had no money for the ride, and so, out of generosity, Alex paid for him. The blind man thanked him, but warned, “I would strongly advise you to walk home this evening.” Alex took his advice. Later that evening, Alex turned on the television only to find that the bus he had been due to take home had been subject to a terrorist attack.

The next day the blind man was not on the bus. He never reappeared.*

“urban myths”—are stories that are not true, but are told as if they were true. They may be recounted through jokes, wisecracks, anecdotes, sayings, proverbs, gossip, chitchat, rumors, and folklore in such a way as to suggest that they happened to someone close to the teller (e.g., a relation or a friend of a friend). And this gives them a false credibility. The themes of the Urban Legend are often similar. They include taboos such as food contamination (the worm burger, the deep-fried rat, the goat curry, the mouse in the bottle), the threat from outside (alligators in the sewers, the beast of Bodmin Moor), and conspiracy theories (the USA started World War II, Jewish people were responsible for 9/11). In terms of their content, these legends can be shocking, strange, uncanny, curious, and even funny. But they exist for a purpose. Their purpose is primarily to communicate some sort of moral to others in a simple, transferable, and memorable form.

Urban Legends are often interesting when linked to objects, images, and texts. The speed and power of the Harley-Davidson, for example, has encouraged the legend of the Hell’s Angels, with all manner of stories— some of which are true—about their violence and sexual prowess. The Turin Shroud, which was said to have the image of Christ imprinted on it, has also been the subject of speculative stories concerning how it came into being. *Macbeth* by Shakespeare has been the focus of many stories of bad luck, including numerous tales of serious injuries to actors who have been asked to perform it. These are all examples of our ability to be taken in by Urban Legends.

CAN YOU TELL ANYTHING ABOUT THIS PERSON BY HIS APPEARANCE?

At one time there was thought to be an art of reading character from faces. This art was called physiognomy. You can judge whether there is such an art by asking yourself whether you can say anything about the character or persona of the man on the previous page just by looking at him?

Maybe you think you can say something vague about the character of this man by studying his face. Perhaps his appearance makes you want to say that he is serious and intelligent. Perhaps the fact that he is staring so intensely makes you want to say that he is highly analytical. Now consider whether your initial judgment is challenged when I tell you that this is a photograph of the artist Ken Woodward. On reading this information do you start to see more artistic features in his character?

Clearly there is something of an art to reading faces, but equally there is also something of an art to reading objects. The Volkswagen Beetle is a classic example of how character and persona might be read into an object. The designers of the VW Beetle ensured that it had a character and personality by using what has been called “cute” styling. When designers use “cute” styling they draw on the characteristics of human, and sometimes nonhuman, babies for inspiration. Human babies have rounded features, prominent foreheads, tiny noses, large eyes, and short chins, all of which gives them a character and personality that appears to be honest, pure, vulnerable, and naive. These features were mimicked in the VW Beetle, with the curves of its body, the large round lights, and the smoothness of its detailing. And it is this form of styling that helps to explain the feelings of affection we have for it. (This

explanation also helps to account for the popularity of the *Herbie* movies of the 1960s and 1970s—movies that imbued a particular VW Beetle with a personality and life that was independent of the wills of its owners.)

WHAT IS CURIOUS ABOUT THIS PHOTOGRAPH?

The stories that we tell about the world can always be presented from different viewpoints. And the viewpoint from which we choose to present a story will always influence how we read it.

News stories are often presented from a viewpoint that is apt to seem impartial. They are usually filmed in such a way that the viewer is able to feel that the events that are being portrayed are simply being documented rather than framed with a certain agenda in mind. However, we know that each shot has been chosen, each angle has been arranged, and each image has been composed. This, along with editing, voice-overs, and other forms of postproduction, aids and abets the outcome. And this should make us realize that most news stories merely present things from one carefully chosen viewpoint. In short, they are not as objective as they might at first seem.

The photograph overleaf is of a group of people standing in front of the *Mona Lisa*. The viewpoint from which it has been taken is unusual because most visitors to the Louvre in Paris take a photograph of the *Mona Lisa* itself rather than of the people who are standing in front of it. There are various reasons why people might want to photograph the painting rather than its audience. One is that they may wish to record the experience they have had. (This may be so that they can prove to their friends that they have actually seen the painting.) I chose to take this picture from a different viewpoint in order to demonstrate that even though the visitors to the gallery feel pleased to be in the presence of this picture they do not always feel obliged to look at it. In short, the picture has an “aura” that appears to transcend how it looks.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THESE PEOPLE?

Mystery is part of any good story. Mystery gives us a place for speculation. In his painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), Théodore Géricault chooses a narrative moment about which we can only wonder. Some things we know already. The picture represents a shipwreck. The *Medusa* hit a reef on a day in July 1816. It seems that there was insufficient food on the raft and that the wounded became the victims of cannibalism. We also know that very few of the nearly 150 people on the raft were rescued.

It is the job of a news reporter to be true to life, though that may not be the job of the painter; his job is to make art. And if truth gets in the way of making good art, then some artists think that truth may have to be sacrificed. One mystery is the extent to which Géricault was willing to sacrifice the truth in order to keep a sense of wonder in his picture. Géricault, it appears, went to some lengths to ensure that his picture was accurate. He read the reports of two survivors of the wreck, Henri Savigny and Alexander Corréard. He also interviewed them. But were they telling the truth, and did Géricault represent the truth as they told it? Why did he not depict the cannibalism that was alleged to have taken place? And why did he depict so many people on the raft when Savigny and Corréard had told him there were only 15 survivors? It is something of a mystery.

Stories always change in the telling. The facts may be altered, the characters improved, the details enhanced, and the chronology of the events changed. So when we are told a story—any story—do we want to know what really happened, or do we care more about the mysteries that make the story interesting?

WHAT MAKES THIS SEQUENCE SO TENSE?

The tension exists in this sequence because all of these images involve something happening that does not seem to have been entirely resolved. That is what makes us want to move from one image to the next.

Tension can arise in a similar way in still images too. For example, in documentary photography, a sense of narrative tension may be created when an action shot is frozen at the moment that is most dramatic (e.g., when someone is hitting a ball in a sports match). By capturing a moment in this way, the photographer can suggest what might have come before that instant and what might occur after it. The stillness of the action creates both narrative tension and expectation.

Narrative tension is not confined to images, though. We can also think of narrative tensions as existing in texts. Compare the following:

The cat sat on the mat.

The cat sat on the dog's mat.

Which is the best story? Is it: "The cat sat on the mat"? Maybe not. If this is a story, then there is not much to it because there is no tension. "The cat sat on the dog's mat," however, is different. This is a better story precisely because some form of tension has been created. As a result, we can imagine something dramatic happening. (Stories take place when something happens. If nothing happens, there is no story.) When we know that the cat has sat on the dog's mat we want to ask: "Why did the cat sit on the dog's mat? What happened when the dog found out? Was he angry about it? Was he nonchalant? Did the cat get

away with it in the end?" Of course, we can ask why the cat sat on the mat, but the reply we receive may be found wanting.

Narrative tensions can sometimes exist in objects as well. For example, objects of Postmodern design are given tension by the way in which they meld styles (old and new), materials (valuable and cheap, brand new and second-hand), and processes of manufacture (industrial and handmade). These objects create a challenge for the standard linear narratives of design history. This is because by melding such different styles, materials, and processes of manufacture from different epochs, the meanings of these objects, in terms of their place in history, start to fracture. Although they can be accurately dated, they seem to belong to different parts of the past all at once.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Turning points are often at their most obvious in the cinema. What happens in Hitchcock's famous film *Psycho* (see the still from the film on the previous page)—but skip this paragraph if you have not yet seen the film—is that a turning point occurs when the protagonist played by Janet Leigh is suddenly murdered. This event provides the turning point in the film because up until then the story appeared to be about the theft of some money. Following this event, the story becomes about whether, among other things, the police will discover, first, that this woman has been murdered, and second who the perpetrator is.

Turning points consist in key moments when something occurs that brings about a change. In narratives this usually requires there to be a significant contrast between that which happened before a set of events and that which will happen after them. Often the turning point is spectacular, exciting, or extraordinary. History is said to have its turning points when an important and sudden event leads to a big change (e.g., the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand that led to World War I). Music is said to have its turning points when there is an abrupt change in rhythm, harmony, or melody (e.g., the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony). Speech is said to have its turning points where there is an unexpected change in tone or emphasis in terms of sound (e.g., the famous speech that includes the phrase "I have a dream..." made by the civil rights protester Dr. Martin Luther King). Strangely, we tend not to think of objects as having turning points, even though they can have them. The turning point in the life of an object might be the moment when it is first used, when it is broken, when it is sold, when it is lost, or when it is given as a gift.

HOW DOES THIS STORY END?

Stories are often deliberately created with some form of conflict. This is so that, by the end of the story, the conflict can be resolved. That is why film writers are given the advice to start their story: “It all went wrong when...” Stories, in this sense, are there to put things right. If nothing goes wrong then there is no story. That is why you can’t start a story with: “And they lived happily ever after.” That can only be the end of a story because, by starting like that, there is nothing at stake. You might think of business, art, or design in the same way. What are you going to put right? And how? (To know that, of course, you may first need to identify a problem, need, or desire that you can try to meet.)

The short sequence on the previous page has many of the classic elements of a story: it has mystery, tension, a turning point, and a resolution, which, in this case, seems to result in a death. Yet while that can seem like the end of the story we can always ask: But what happened next? What happened to the other driver? What happened to the relatives of the person who died? Did the person driving the car really die, or is a banging sound suddenly heard from inside the coffin as the mourners walk away?

In wanting resolutions, we might say that we fetishize the idea of things having endings. That is why we look for medical cures to be discovered, for legal pronouncements to be decided, for educational programs to be completed, for jobs to be finished, and for stories to reach a conclusion. It is surely no accident that life itself is often seen in terms of a journey and its final resolution. In wishing for these things to be resolved, though, we should not forget the value of the journey that takes us to the resolution. It is this journey, as philosophy has shown, that can often be as valuable as the destination. In fact, even when we reach our destination, we may sometimes find ourselves miraculously back at the

beginning. Every ending may be the beginning of something else.

Once upon a time, there was a book on semiotics called *This Means This, This Means That...*

**The story about Alex Baker has been invented, so there is no genuine explanation for it. The curious thing about this story, though, is that if it were told and retold enough times by the readers of this book it might itself turn into an Urban Legend.*

CONCLUSION

Even though semiotics has seminal texts, established procedures, scholarly debate, publications, and an academic history, it is, as we have seen, still a rather diverse and eclectic subject. This diversity and eclecticism, particularly in terms of its methods, stems from the many different disciplines that it uses for inspiration, including: linguistics, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, sociology, art history, communication studies, media studies, and material culture. The result of this is that the subject has both a weakness and a strength. Its weakness is that there is no body of knowledge of which semiotics can be certain. Its strength is that the absence of such a body of knowledge gives it the freedom to explore new ways of thinking, avenues of interest, and novel ways of exploring meaning. In other words, because it does not have the doctrinal quality of other intellectual disciplines, semiotics can be actively done rather than just passively learned and digested. For in semiotics we don't simply decipher a coded meaning and leave it at that. Instead, we are asked continually to reinterpret, reformat, rework, rethink, and reinvigorate the meanings that we find around us. And this is what makes it such a rewarding subject to investigate.

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